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BARBARA HEATHCOTE'S TRIAL.

BARBARA HEATHCOTE'S TRIAL.

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A Novel.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

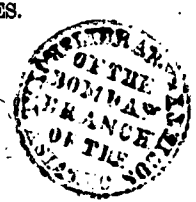
"NELLIE'S MEMORIES," AND "WEE WIFIE."

"Sing of the nature of Woman, and then the song shall be surely full of variety, old crotchets, and most sweet closes. It shall be humorous, grave, fantastic, amorous, melancholy, sprightly, one in all, and all in one."
—MARSTON.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

K.x.c.76

VOL. I.



LONDON:

TINSLEY BROTHERS, 18, CATHERINE ST., STRAND

1871.

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TO

MY FOUR SISTERS,

WHO HAVE BEEN THROUGH JOY AND SORROW

A FOURFOLD BLESSING TO MY LIFE,

This Story

IS DEDICATED.

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BARBARA HEATHCOTE'S TRIAL.

CHAPTER I.

BAB IN THE PINE-WOODS.

"Thou wilt never get thee a husband if thou be so shrewd with thy tongue."—*Shakespeare.*

Only Bab!

Not dear Barbara, not even our Barbara, but only Bab!

Ah, that was just their way:—those Heathcotes were quiet undemonstrative people; sugared epithets, honeyed speeches, seldom fell from their lips. As they themselves would say, still waters run deepest; and perhaps they were right.

Nor were they singular. How many and many a family live their love with a shy reticence perfectly inexplicable to other and warmer natures; sisters, who would cling together till death, shrinking almost painfully from the simplest expression of affection,

hiding love with a thousand little brusqueries, assumed or real, yet now and then under strange circumstances breaking into passionate impulses of which you would never believe them capable.

Odd contradictions, over which one could moralise for a lifetime; unsolvable enigmas of a gnarled and warped human nature! And yet strangest of all is, that under this outer bark of roughness, this icy barrier of reserve, love can live on fresh and young as ever, deprived of its daily nutriment, its sweetest sap; and yet it is so.

I know a family, indeed, where love asserts itself openly, and will not be silenced; where tenderest diminutives fall like a honey-dew, refreshing this work-a-day world of ours, which, for all that poets sing and novelists write, is often barren and weary enough. It is not that they love more than others —God forbid! but the grace of unsealed lips is theirs.

Rare indeed are the exceptions, and seldom found.

Where was I? With Bab in the pine-woods. Oh, those pine-woods! but I am coming to them directly. I want to give you first a slip out of paradise—some lost corner, world-forgotten and unheeded, a subject for an idyll.

A sky dimly and deliciously blue, with great piles of clouds sleeping heavily along to westward, trailing ragged fringes of foamy light as they go;

beneath them reaches of pasture-land, full of green sunshine, and long white country roads, dotted here and there with cottages and tangled hedge-rows, rich with blackberry thickets, wild nut-trees, and the sweet-briar rose. A little while hence and those roads will be purple with heather, and bordered with tall shadowy bracken; and even now there is no lack of coloring, for the gold of the furze is here, and the dark firwoods stretch themselves out as a dusky background, larch, spruce, and Scotch fir forming blue-black distances, cutting massily against the summer sky. One treads softly over the mouldering bracken and heather of last year's growth, sinking ankle-deep the while with delicious crispy sounds into the dry leaf-mould. What a silence and mystery in these woods!—the long aisles, with their green misty light, their perfumy stillness broken only by the wood-dove's note. Bab, in her quaint fanciful way, called them the ghosts of other woods, and always hushed her breath as she walked between their mast-like stems, while the sweet incense of the pines breathed spicily around her; but Bab has plenty of these weird sayings, and who minds them? Not that merry party who have grouped themselves so picturesquely in that steep little glade down yonder, couched snugly on the dry heather, judging from their laughing utterances and gay snatches of

song. Ah, we have come to the Heathcotes at last—the family of Dr. Heathcote, until lately sole physician of the pretty little outlying hamlet of Sunningford.

I hate descriptions: if I were to talk to you for an hour, I could not make you see these dear people with my eyes. Introductions are apt to be stupid and tiresome in the best society; a thing well over had better not be done at all, or at least done briefly. From my own experience, I confess, after having carefully studied a well-digested portrait drawn with pen and ink as only some of our best authors can draw them, I am as utterly at a loss what to do with the several features, and how to piece them together and produce a whole, as a child of four years old drawing on a slate, under whose quaintly developed figure one must write, to understand it, "This is a man."

Given, for example, a beautiful girl—for let us be logical; we read—let me see, what is the present fashionable color for hair in this sensational century? Oh, the Lucretia Borgia, or something like it—all descriptions of red and auburn. Well, then, first we have the aquiline nose—I never could quite distinctly see that feature, but never mind, it is always aquiline or *retroussé;* then the round dimpled chin, the transparent complexion, of course —who ever puts a bad complexion into a book, or

reproduces any of the monstrosities of nature, though it is an age of weakness and tonics?—eyes blue or cloud-grey, with some mysterious combination of the usual appendages, eyelashes and eyebrows; and then that mass of red sunshine, her hair. Well, do you see that face, that bright, speaking face? does it live? does it answer you back? Who wants this bathos of description?—say, she was tall and fair, or she is little and dark, and have done with it; make her live, and make her talk, bring her through her joys and sorrows gallantly; and we shall see her plainly enough, and bless you for your modest reticence. Hem! but there is another side to that question. Will the public taste be satisfied to have their heroes and heroines turned upon the scenes in that brusque sort of way? How will such a daring disregard of all conventional rules and models be received? Nay, I know a brave writer or two who have ventured upon such a plan, who have described character instead of faces, and dwelt chiefly on features of the mind. Where the huntsmen have made the gap, the hounds may follow: who knows? we may be in at the death, all the same.

What a digression!—a thousand pardons. And now for the Heathcotes of Sunningford.

Ah! you are looking at Hester Heathcote; of course you are,—people always do. You would

mark her out among a hundred, even in a ball-room, and simply because probably she would be the most beautiful woman there, or would be—for let us have nature even in her imperfection—if she were not so pale, and her face had a little more expression in it: it is merely a fine masque, after all—too much power and reticence, a reticence that, by forbidding animation, spoils all. One would look long at her, and little at her young sister Connie, though she is a pretty fair-headed little Saxon enough; for while the one face is capable of much, did it not repress all feeling, the other is capable of very little—a light, simple soul, hopelessly young, and reflected in mere prettiness.

The tall, angular man, with the thin face and grey beard, is their father, Dr. Heathcote; and the handsome gipsy by his side is his only son Leigh. Look at his lounging attitude, the quick, impulsive way he throws back his head, the boyish gesture, making his father's shoulder a resting-place for his arm, and then flinging himself back on the grass again with a careless whistle. These things, though trivial, are suggestive.

Those two opposite them are mother and son; no one would guess it, however: that is Norman Strath, Dr. Heathcote's present assistant and future partner. Something in the proud independence of his manner and bearing, and the many diamond

rings on Mrs. Strath's white fingers, seem to attest they have seen better days; if they have, Sunningford does not know it: some people keep their own counsel for good and ill. Norman Strath has been reading aloud to them from Tennyson's "Idylls of the King;" he has left off now, and the party are discussing it with some interest. Hester goes on with her sketching, and looks a little disdainful.

"Poetry is all very well, and very pretty," she observed, "but it is apt to degenerate into mere sentimentalism. For my part, I think Enid was a tame, poor-spirited wife after all; and I have no patience with her."

"A speech worthy of Barbara," laughed Leigh. "Now for an argument: go it, Strath."

"No; Miss Heathcote has spoken, and it is a good thing there are no young pattern wives here to listen to such heresy. I am sorry Tennyson has failed to make you comprehend his sweet conceptions, and the beauty of Enid's faith and obedience; but, pardon me, the loss is yours."

"I know it," returned Hester. "I was certain of having a minority on my side in this virtuous company: even Mrs. Strath is against me."

Mrs. Strath smiled in her sad quiet way.

"You are—are you not, Mrs. Strath?"

"My dear Hester, I simply dispute your right to argue on such matters at all. Only perfect love

ensures perfect obedience: till you experience the one, you cannot practise the other. What do young things like you know of either?"

Hester bit her lip, colouring slightly.

"We were speaking of generalities, Mrs. Strath —what your son would term abstract ideas. I hope," somewhat haughtily, "that you do not dispute my right to argue on these."

Mrs. Strath looked a little grave for the occasion, —but then she was generally grave.

"My mode of expressing myself has offended you, Hester. What I meant was this:—Even to criticise, one requires knowledge, experience, and a fitting discrimination of things. To judge of Enid, you must put yourself in her place: in her century, women were mere vassals; and were you she, and your love for Geraint as great and reverential as hers was, you would find yourself leading those three horses as meekly as ever she did, and forget your humiliation in your pain."

Hester shook her head, and compressed her lips into a "Never;" the others laughed.

"That will do, mother," said Norman quietly. "Dr. Heathcote, it is time for me to ride over to Basingstoke, is it not?".

"Not for the next half-hour, my boy. Roger will be here with the horses by then. Leigh, you lazy good-for-nothing, why can't you run down to

the 'Green Man,' and see if he understood my orders?"

"Not if I know it, sir. Roger will be here punctually enough. The old fogie at Basingstoke will die quite as comfortably without yours or Norman's assistance."

"Leigh," said his father, reprovingly; but Leigh only looked incorrigible, and patted his shoulder patronisingly.

"Did it put on its professional face, then, when it hears one of its patients is going to die—as if it has not killed plenty of people before this? I say, daddy, run up a long bill, and give us half. I am awfully short just now."

"Leigh, Leigh, as though that were any new thing."

"A thing's never the worse for being old. No, 'pon honour, as Geoffrey says, I really am serious."

"So am I—painfully so, I assure you. Hullo! what's that?—Roger before his time?"

"Roger, no; it's Barbara, by all that's good. What has the little monkey been up to?"

"Nonsense, my dear Leigh; no girl could execute a whistle like that. Don't tell me; it's Roger."

"Done! Half-a-dozen pairs of the best kids to one of your old-fashioned stocks that it's Barbara. Norman, you are witness to the governor's bet."

"No, no," expostulated Dr. Heathcote, laughing, while Leigh took out his note-book in a business-like manner; "if that is what you have learnt at college, more shame to you—only don't go and teach it to your new pupil, that's all."

"Six pairs of the best four-and-sixpenny," wrote Leigh, profoundly deaf for the nonce to all things, good or bad, "to one black-corded, &c. There, sir, I hope you are satisfied; the bet, as the ancients have it—Pliny, I think, first taught the art—the bet, monsieur, is mine."

"Leigh, Leigh!" groaned the doctor, feebly pulling at his grey moustache, for the bright-faced gipsy was to him as the apple of his eye. "Well, boys will be boys to the end of time, and I declare I thought it was Roger."

And thereupon there sauntered up to them in the midst of the green gloom a little listless figure, brown-haired and brown-eyed, and dressed as soberly as a little nun.

"Only Bab."

She was idling along in a hoppety step peculiar to herself and Dame Trot. She had bustled up her brown dress in an old-century fashion, pulled somehow through the pocket-holes, and was striking at the slender stems of the firs with a little switch she had cut off a hazel-tree, and looked from head to foot as sweet and wholesome as a little nut; not

for long, however, for as she drew near the party her face took petulant curves, and then you saw what a wilful little soul it was.

Was she pretty? Most certainly not. Was she attractive? To some people, and under some phases, but not by any means at all times; for Barbara was truer to herself when alone.

She sauntered up now, looking defiance.

"So you have come at last," cried Leigh, eagerly. "Do you know, Barbara, I could hear you whistling right over in the nut-copse yonder, when the rest of them thought it was Roger; and the governor's been and laid a bet on it."

"Has he?" said the doctor, grimly; "you young Jackanapes, do be quiet."

"It's just like your impudence," returned Barbara, answering him, and not her father; "that's the way you Cantabs throw away your money. Well, never mind; now you have won the bet, of course we shall go shares—Gyp, Partner, and Co., you know: the lightest shade of lavender for one pair, and a brown—that beautiful fawn-brown—for another; and let me see?" And here Barbara stretched out the prettiest little hands imaginable —Bab's one beauty, and she was vain enough of it, I can tell you, as women are when they have a single admirable point.

"And do you mean to say," asked Hester se-

verely, "that it was really you whistling in the roads, Barbara? Connie, don't laugh so absurdly;" for Connie, quiet hitherto, had woke up to sudden merriment.

"In the roads, no—by all the honour of the Heathcotes; in the copse, yes. Would you like to take a lesson, Hester? put your lips so;" and Bab puckered up her mouth in the sauciest manner, while she executed a prolonged variation.

"It is a very unladylike accomplishment," returned she, much displeased; "Bab, I am surprised at you: what will Mrs. Strath think?"

"Whatever Mrs. Strath likes. My dear Hester, don't look at me in that frozen manner: I declare I felt quite warm down in the copse, and now I am quite chilly. By-the-bye," she continued, sitting down by Leigh and taking off his straw hat to play with, "it occurs to me to give you a sisterly warning. There is such a thing as over-hackneying a given word or subject."

"Nonsense," said Hester abruptly, putting up her sketch-book.

"Ah, there you are again—it is very rude to interrupt; but do just for once give me the definition of the word 'unladylike.'"

"If you don't know it, the more shame for you, ab," said Leigh, catching up his hat and placing it triumphantly, blue ribbon and all, on his curls,

only to be deprived of it again. "I say, you Baby, you Babchen, hand that thing here: do you want a fellow to catch cold in his head?"

"It will only cool your brains a little and do you good, and my fingers want employment. Norman or somebody, do answer my question—why should whistling be unladylike?"

"I never said it was," returned Norman, smiling. "Hit one of your own size, Barbara: I did not lead the attack."

"No; men seldom do," she answered, shrewdly; "you leave that for our sharp tongues—but, like the parrot, they think the more."

"Well, if I must speak, whether I like it or not," replied Norman, smiling, "I suppose it is condemned as a sin against conventionality, and left for the pastime of men and boys, though why or wherefore I am not philosopher enough to know."

"Nor I either," cried Barbara, hotly. "I don't see why a woman should not use her voice as well one way as another, so that it is in harmony. Unladylike and conventional indeed! I hate the terms: mere world-wise rules for little minds that never venture out of the beaten track, or do anything original. I dispute such narrow sophism. I hold a lady can do anything, so that she does it in a ladylike manner; and I can and shall whistle."

"Bravo!" cried Leigh, while her father laughed.

Hester rose and walked away without a word, and Connie followed her.

"Now you've gone and made the old lady cross," exclaimed Leigh; "what for do you go and do it, you pugilistic Baby?"

"Ah! what for indeed?" asked Norman, in a meaning tone. "Why does Barbara always rub somebody's fur the wrong way?"

"Well, what business has she to sit and rebuke me in that cool, dignified manner?" returned Barbara, sharply, as Leigh remarked, *sotto voce*, "Bab's back was up, and no mistake." "Why should not I know what is ladylike or unladylike as well as she?"

"My dear Barbara," remonstrated Dr. Heathcote, gently, "be generous to your sister."

"Well, I can't help it," she answered, doggedly. "Hester is so provoking with her prim ways; and after all, daddy, it is no fault of mine if I inherit your pet failing—a dislike of all humbug. There, leave off wrinkling your forehead; it is all in little ladders now. I hear Roger with the horses, and Norman must start for Basingstoke; and you have to go to Lyn's Hollow about that horrid accident case. Dear, what a world it is!—nothing but sickness and crossness in it!"

"What sort of spectacles have you got on today, little woman?" remarked her father, good-

humouredly, as he got up stiffly and gave himself a shake. "Brush me down, Leigh, please; I am covered all over with half-rotten leaves. And now take Mrs. Strath home with you, children, and give her some tea; and don't treat her to too much chatter on the way. Norman and I will be home about eight."

"Very well, daddy," answered Bab abstractedly. She and Leigh often kept up their childish habit, and called that gentlest of men "daddy." "Mrs. Strath, if you are ready, we will walk on, while Leigh collects the things."

"Yes, always leave me to do all the work," grumbled Leigh, not raising himself from his elbow. "I wish the vassal age would come again,—that I do." But for once his remonstrance was unheeded, for Barbara was already half way through the wood, whistling deftly as she went.

CHAPTER II.

HEATHCOTE HOUSE.

"What are they? that old house of yours which gave
Such welcomes oft to me, the sunbeams fall
Still, down the squares of blue and white which pave
Its hospitable hall."
"A brave old house! a garden full of bees,
Large drooping poppies, and Queen hollyhocks
With butterflies for crowns—tree peonies,
And pinks, and goldilocks."—*Jean Ingelow.*

"BARBARA," said Mrs. Strath, gently, as they turned down one of the white country roads—"Barbara, how can you have the heart to vex Hester as you do?"

Bab, who had been sauntering along by the hedgerows, pulling at the young bracken and peering into every thicket in search of birds' nests, turned round with a face of conscious innocence, and, taking her companion's arm, walked along as demurely as a little brown mouse.

"My child, you are sinning against your better nature in doing so; it is not worthy of you."

"Mrs. Strath, did you ever see anything so pro-

voking as Hester's manner?—it is enough to try a saint."

"I did not notice it, Barbara, I assure you; but if this be one of the daily disagreements you complain of, I can only say they must be of your own bringing on, and shall be of Hester's opinion soon, that you are utterly unmanageable."

"Ah! that is just it. I won't be managed. I hate to be managed. I should like to know whose business it is to manage me unless it be daddy; and I fancy I see him trying to do it. Mrs. Strath, I wonder how it ever happened for two such incongruous characters as Hester and myself to be sisters? If you were to hunt through the whole wide world, I believe you could not find two human beings more utterly dissimilar—more completely antagonistic."

"I dare say not; it often happens in families, and the consequence is, there are often hard rubs before the different angles fit in and get rounded."

"That will never be the case with Hester and me: we only sharpen each other's angles, and make them more apparent; and as for fitting in, bless you, there's no giving up or coming down between us."

"He maketh men to be of one mind in a house," said Mrs. Strath, solemnly.

Barbara winced. She was not unaccustomed to these little "goody bits," as she called them, in

Mrs. Strath's talk; but they never came sweetly to her, for Barbara was not good, and she thought these sort of speeches were not applicable to the six working days of the week, but might be more fittingly reserved for the seventh: it was so like the cant of the Methodists; and Bab hated cant.

"It would be rather difficult to make us think alike," she continued, rather sullenly. "But what is the good of talking? What can't be cured must be endured: I don't know a wiser proverb than that."

"I know one that is ten times better. 'He that ruleth his spirit is greater than he who taketh a city.' Barbara, I think, if we go deep enough and probe the wound, we can find a cure better than if we gloss it over with idle complaint and ignorant self-deceit."

"What do you mean?" asked Barbara, startled; for Mrs. Strath, candid as she was, had never spoken to her so quite earnestly before.

"What I mean is, that I could lay my finger on the sore place at once, and give you the root of the whole matter, the hidden source from whence proceed all the disagreements and weary home-crosses of which you so bitterly complain. Shall I do it, Barbara?"

"Certainly; only I doubt your capacity."

"Then doubt it no more. The origin and nature

of the disease is jealousy, and sorely indeed are you bitten by it."

"Mrs. Strath!"

"There, I have roused your spirit; you are angry, and justly so, at finding yourself convicted of a sin at once so mean and so despicable. But do not deceive yourself, my child—do not shelter yourself under self-complacency—it is simply jealousy."

"Go on," said Barbara. She had never been spoken to like this in all her life before, and, to do her justice, she never refused to hear the truth.

"You are jealous of Hester," continued Mrs. Strath, "jealous of her great beauty, and her power of winning friends—of the influence she maintains over all who know her. In your great hungry heart—you have a great hungry heart, Barbara, and a thirsting one, too, poor child—you ask, 'Why have I nothing, and she everything?' and in the bitterness of envy you see her every action with a jaundiced eye."

"Well," said Barbara: she could not say more, for the little choke in her voice.

"I am sorry for Hester," mused Mrs. Strath. "It is sad to see her laden with a heavy responsibility, and trying so painfully, with all her faults, to do her duty. It is hard to know that the days go on without a pleasant word and hardly a pleasant look from you, Barbara, and only the worry of contradic-

tion and the jar of petulance to fret her really even temper."

"You are unjust to me, Mrs. Strath, and unjust, doubly so to Hester."

"I know she has faults," she assented, quietly; "have I not just said so? and many and grievous ones. I know she is cold in manner, and proud, and a little hard, and that the consciousness of not being understood makes her more so; but she loves you, Barbara—don't shake your head and pretend to deny it; she is proud of you and your cleverness, and would willingly be friends if your hauteur and contradiction would allow it."

Barbara shook her head again mournfully, and sighed.

"Think over my words, dear girl, you will find them soberness and truth; think over them on your knees, for we know best what is true there, and what is false. Examine your own conscience, if the root of the disease be not envy and jealousy and all uncharitableness, and then it will rest with yourself whether you will be 'whole of that plague.' Have I spoken to you too plainly?"

"No," answered Barbara; and then she added slowly and with intense effort, "no, you are right; and yet if it be as you say, the evil is deep down and entwine with my very life."

"Think over it," was all Mrs. Strath said, "and

now let us talk on pleasanter subjects;" and she pressed the girl's arm closer to her side, for, in spite of her reproof, she loved Barbara better than Connie or even Hester, and had spoken to her as she would have done to her own child.

"I have done my duty by her for once," she went on musingly to herself, "as I would to any other poor motherless girl that I saw going astray; but the evil is, as I suspect, and as she says, deep down, and Hester's manner is provoking: I am afraid till the one has tasted sorrow, and the other joy, they will never amalgamate better than oil and water."

An honest conclusion, and one to which Barbara came in the course of their long silent walk; for either she could not or would not talk. In her secret heart of hearts, she knew Mrs. Strath was right, and that the matter was so; but how to mend it?—alas! she lacked both the willingness and the power. "If Hester were to do wrong," she said to herself, "show weakness, or even condescend to weakness, I could unbend and give her plenty of love; but this cold, self-sufficient, putting-down manner is like a wall of ice between us, and break through it I cannot"—say will not, Barbara, that would be nearer the truth.

They were drawing near the end of their walk now, and were just approaching the outskirts of the village, which, like most other English villages, was

cleanly and cheerful, with just enough of detail to make up a picturesque whole. A farm, with its deep-littered straw-yard, and dappled cows standing knee-deep in shady half-dried pools, with here and there a brood of yellow ducklings; a green sunshiny field, a few young lambs frisking about their black-faced mothers, a blind old horse under a tree, and a shepherd's dog propped against the horse-trough, snapping at flies with his gaping mouth; an orchard full of delicious shadows and beehives, odd scraps and ends of beauty for an artistic eye to seize upon, and perhaps to reproduce. Then the long straggling street of the village, grass-grown and shady with trees; the cottages with their small latticed windows and whitewashed fronts, perfectly embowered in roses in summer-time, their gardens gay with bright homely flowers, lupins and stocks, borders of London pride, and great bunches of southernwood. Then the inn, with three large elm trees, encircled with benches; then the wheelwright's and stonemason's, the Methodist chapel, and the little all-sort shops, before which the barefooted urchins rolled their alley-tors on the side paths, and brown-faced babies sunned themselves about the low stone steps in company with a half-starved cur. A cleanly, pretty little village on the whole, with quaint old-fashioned ways of its own, where even the day-laborer touched his cap, and the children grinned and curtseyed, or

pulled their sandy forelocks to the doctor's daughter as she passed. Then up a sunny little hill, past the old Norman church, with its great square tower, and the new school-house; past the Parsonage, with its trim lawns and shrubberies, and the low white cottage where Mrs. Strath lived, down a steep grassy lane, and in at a green door in the wall, with Dr. Heathcote's name inscribed on a brass plate.

A great sunny red-brick house was Dr. Heathcote's, half covered with ivy, which clambered about the old walls, not trimly and decently trained, but hanging over many a window in ragged festoons, till some hand, impatient of light and air, had torn it from its resting-place, where it hung down in bowery lengths like green serpents uncoiled, or what Barbara called picturesque confusion. She was admiring it now, as she and Mrs. Strath entered the dimly lighted hall, which even on the hottest summer day was like a patch of cool delicious shadow, where one might sit looking through the open door on to the green sunshiny wilderness beyond. It was furnished pleasantly too, though with more regard to comfort than taste. The summer matting, and couches covered with Turkish-looking chintz, the oddly-shaped tables, with fern-cases and aquariums, made it more like a dwelling-room, which perhaps it was. The plot of ground before the house was laid out in trimly cut beds, and

crowded with old-fashioned flowers, pansies, convolvulus and sweet Williams, Turk's caps, and beds of tall white lilies, hollyhocks, and blazing sunflowers. But behind the house, and stretching far away, lay another beautiful garden, unlike any I have ever seen before. There were flowers and beehives and sweet-scented shrubs in the front, but here there were none: it was like a glade in a forest, and nothing else. A great narrow lawn—narrow as regards its size—but immensely long, green, and soft as velvet, and shaded on either side by tall forest trees. Some one who loved arboriculture must have planted those trees, they were so varied and beautiful—elms, acacia, and silvery birch, rowans, and sycamores and horse chestnuts, with patches of firs and larches, aspens, and tall dark junipers, and many more than I can remember. Half-way up the lawn, under a large elm-tree, was a pretty little summer-house covered with Virginian creepers, which crept in at the lattioed windows and open door and festooned the roof; here Barbara, with one companion, of whom I shall speak presently, sat reading or dreaming through many a summer's noon. This lawn formed the whole of the garden, with the exception of a narrow winding walk, planted with laurel and dark with yews, which led right round it to a little sunny kitchen-garden at one side. To Barbara the whole was but a paradise of delight.

All her life long, even when she was in other and far grander scenes, her affection clung tenaciously to the old garden, and she firmly declared she never had seen and never should see anything more beautiful.

There was nothing very striking as regards the house itself, except perhaps its age and its dryness; a queer, rambling, shambling old place, full of low oak-ceiled rooms and labyrinthian out-of-the-way passages. There had been an effort made to modernise one or two of the sitting-rooms, which had failed signally. True, the panelling had been replaced with handsome flock and gilt paper, and the narrow window-frames filled with plate glass; but they could not get rid of the lowness and narrowness; and strange to say, these rooms were the most uncomfortable of any, though Hester had fitted up the window-seats with cushions of her own and Connie's working, and had coaxed her father to frame Barbara's crayon drawings just to give a little life and coloring—improvements at which Bab had inwardly groaned, and outwardly pulled a very long face, terming Hester's efforts useless innovations and vile patcheries, and then, rubbing her cheek against the crimson flock, and declaring it was as soft as a blanket, and as pretty as one dyed red might be, fled up the staircase and took refuge in her own den, from the vanities and vagaries, as she

assured herself, of this wicked world. This den, or, as Barbara called it, "my suite of apartments," was another bone of contention between the sisters, Hester declaring it was a great waste of labor and extravagance of fuel to keep fires up in that poky little place, when there were three or four sitting-rooms downstairs waiting to be used, and wishing her father would not encourage her in these outlandish and unsociable habits; and Barbara, on her side, retorting that she would sit and freeze, if Hester was so good as to wish it, and had a desire to get rid of her by any slow and inflammatory ways, and then fiercely blazing up, declared she would have her den if she pleased, or twenty of them, if Hester were to talk for a twelvemonth,—asserting her independence in a way more bristling than agreeable. And it was to her den she repaired on this afternoon in question, after having deposited Mrs. Strath in the large cheerful apartment which Hester and Connie shared in common; and, if you have no objection, we will follow this faulty little woman to her lair, as Leigh termed it, or as she truly observed, her boudoir or writing-place. The large narrow gallery, with its tall oak presses and many windows and passages, was rather a pleasanter room in summer than in winter time; but in both seasons of the year Barbara generally passed over it as quickly as she could, it being specially presided over by the

goddess of the broom, who made it a receptacle or general airing-place for household linen and stores of carpet, Hester being, like most other young housekeepers, somewhat fussy in domestic matters, and a great advocate of Barbara's abhorrence, a spring cleaning—"as if a house ought not to be always clean the whole year round," Barbara would assert indignantly. "If I ever have a house of my own, no one shall know a domestic detail in it except myself, and everything shall be done like magic in the early morning," a piece of novel domestic economy to which Hester would invariably reply in the same calmly scornful tone, "When you have, Barbara, I will certainly come to you to take lessons," that meaningly uttered "when" driving Barbara profoundly mad.

On one side of the landing-place was a long winding passage, with the servants' rooms on each side and a red-baized door at the end. As Barbara pushed this slowly open, a narrow steep little staircase came to view, with a door above, which being likewise opened took you—if you did not know any better—down a high twisting-ankle step, and right into the centre of Bab's den. Just as she was about to throw off her hat, a great scratching and scrambling was heard in the passage below; and as Bab looked down the staircase, the baized door was jerked back an inch or two, and a black nose protruded itself,

then a curly paw, and lastly the noble head of a huge Newfoundland, who came lumbering and tumbling up three steps at a time, and raced with a joyous bark into the middle of the room, where he began scratching and nosing at an old tiger-skin with a delighted air of proprietorship, preparatory to lying down. This was Ben, the second inhabitant of Barbara's den.

Many months ago Norman Strath, not approving of Barbara's long solitary walks, had asked her whether she would like a dog for companionship and perhaps protection, and on Bab's answering carelessly, "Yes; anything but a black and tan terrier or a half-dressed poodle," he had brought her Ben. When Bab saw the great solemn Newfoundland, with his beautiful trusty face and handsome coat—black, with great splashes of curly white,—as he quietly walked round and inspected her, she gave a little cry of delight, and sitting on the doorstep as she was, she put her arms round the dog's neck and looked into his eyes—"Will you be my friend, Ben? Will you love me, and take care of me?" And if ever dog's face spoke, Ben's answered, "Yes." And so Bab had got a companion. Wherever she went, Ben went too. From the first day, he took up his quarters in the little outer room, sleeping at night on his tiger-skin at her door, and lying at her feet for hours

together, with his nose in her lap, as she sat on her little low stool reading; and when his wandering instinct tempted him abroad, and his doggish patience could be proof no longer against summer sun and breezy air, he would tap her arm with his paw gently, looking up in her face the while, as much as to say, "It is too fine to be reading here, little mistress; come out into the woods and fields." And nine times out of ten Barbara would listen to him and go.

And what a snug little den it was! quite a "cubby-house," as the children say.

Through the half-opened doors one could catch glimpses of a dainty little bower beyond, looking as cool and fresh as white draperies and hangings could make it; for, in spite of Hester's strictures on cleanliness and neatness, Barbara was a tidy little lady in her way, and loved to have everything ship-shape and orderly about her, and, with all her inconsistencies, had a thorough estimate of the fitness of things. I have hinted before that Barbara was not good; by that I mean that religion was to her only a theory—one that it was curious and interesting to work out on Sundays, but had nothing whatever to do with the government of her daily life. If you had asked if she said her prayers every night, she would have answered in a shocked voice, "Yes," lifting up her very eye-

brows in Pharisaical surprise. Yet when Mrs. Strath bade her think out her troubles on her knees, Bab winced in a terrified way, and in her inmost heart sneered at her for bringing such Methodistical cant into conversation. "And she pretending to be such a thorough church woman, and wanting daily services and all that rubbish. One would think she had attended chapel all her life. Why can't people be consistent, I should like to know, and keep sermons for pulpits? I suppose, because women may not speak in churches —at least St. Paul tells them they must not,— and Mrs. Strath does not like to hold her tongue; but it is not a bit 'lady-like,' as Hester is always saying." And so the critical little sinner went on lulling her conscience to sleep with drugged sophistries, and quite unconscious that Mrs. Strath saw to the bottom of her narrow heart, and that she yearned over her as if she were the only lost sheep that had gone astray on her own wilful paths.

No, Bab was not a bit good; but she had her theoretical notions of religion, and practised them in her own vague way. She would read nothing but the heaviest doctrinal books on Sunday, and invariably go to sleep over them; and she would have no pictures in her sleeping-room that were not strictly of a sacred character, and

such as to promote devotional feelings, with what meaning or result Bab best knew herself.

So great plaster angels, trailing their white robes about their feet, smiled stonily placid from the walls, or leaned on harmless swords over the little tent bed, while above the mantel-piece was a beautiful print of the "Last Supper," by Leonardo di Vinci, and an "Ecce Homo" beneath it, guarded on either side by a "Mater Dolorosa" and a "Magdalene;" and, lest this should not be suggestive enough, there was a little stand of devotional books, with "Thomas à Kempis" and "Taylor's Holy Living" at the top, all very carefully dusted every morning, if nothing else.

Do not imagine there was any hypocrisy in this. Barbara was only acting up to her theoretical notions, and was quite horrified at Connie, who strewed novels and every kind of rubbish about her room, and who never read or listened to a sermon in her life, if she could help it. But it was the little den that was Bab's real "cubby-house." Everything that was odd, cracked, or original in the house was begged, borrowed, or smuggled into that queer oblong room which was Bab's world. It really was a wonder how her clever fingers turned and twisted the shabby materials so as to produce such a picturesque effect and such a comfortable whole.

The faded carpet was hidden under crimson drugget; the rickety old table—their nursery-table it was—covered with a handsome braided cloth; the ugly small-paned windows half concealed by new muslin curtains that Bab had bought with her last quarter's money, much to Hester's indignation.

There was a rocking-chair, an old-fashioned gentleman's escritoire, and an easel, a carved what-not on its last legs, propped by main force against the wall, and laden with all manner of curiosities in cracked China, superannuated vases, and silver-lined shells, two or three birds of paradise, and a little heathen god, sitting cross-legged and smiling fiendishly. But to enumerate all Barbara's treasures were impossible: they were of all sorts and sizes, from a Swiss cuckoo-clock down to a nodding mandarin.

There were plaster busts and figures here likewise, but of a strictly mythological character. A large lumbering old sofa, with its dull moreen covering all darkened and stained with ink, which had been in their school-room for a long time, and was so comfortable, stood just in a nice recess, and Leigh liked to lie on it; but how to better its dinginess was beyond even her resources. But one day she remembered an heirloom, one of the few that had come down to her—an Indian scarf, a most brilliant specimen of needlework; it was useless

for anything but acting charades. Bab fingered it long, and then, quick as thought, wound it carefully over and round the old school-room sofa, till it stood out now in a blaze of oriental glory, with its golden embossed flowers and scarlet embroidery. Barbara was so elated with her own genius that she had up Hester to look at it; but after the first surprised exclamation Hester only remarked, "Are you mad, Barbara? Wherever have you learnt all this sinful extravagance?" After which uncalled-for censure, Bab never invited her up into her snuggery again; but Leigh came often, and stayed long, trailing his lazy length on the oriental couch, and maintaining all the while that it was "awfully jolly, and no end snug;" and Barbara agreed with him.

CHAPTER III.

HESTER.

"And did she love him?—what if she did not?
Their home was still the home of happiest years;
Nor thought was exiled to partake his lot,
Nor heart lost courage through foreboding fears;
Nor echo did against her secret plot,
Nor music her betray to painful tears;
Nor life become a dream, and sunshine dim,
And riches poverty because of him.

"But did she love him?—what and if she did?
Love cannot cool the burning Austral sand,
Nor show the secret waters that lie hid
In arid valleys of that desert land.
Love has no spells can scorching winds forbid,
Or bring the help which tarries near to hand,
Or spread a cloud for curtaining faded eyes
That gaze up, dying, into alien skies."—*Jean Ingelow.*

THAT was a strange remark that Barbara made to Mrs. Strath during their homeward walk about herself and Hester—strange, yet profoundly true—"If you hunt through the whole wide world, you cannot find two human beings so utterly dissimilar, so completely antagonistic;" and Mrs. Strath felt she was right. They were dissimilar—for sisters,

strikingly so; but Hester's character is one that must bear a little psychological inquiry to be comprehended even imperfectly, its most distinctive traits being subtle and least strongly marked. The secret of Hester's character—of Hester's life—was a love of power; this was the basis, the real motive of her actions, her one ruling passion; yet so strongly was it hidden by her many virtues that it was invisible even to herself. If questioned by her own conscience, she would have replied her motives were two-fold—to do her duty, and to win love: to do her justice, duty always came first in Hester's reckoning.

She was so very upright, so single-souled in her integrity, so candid even in her reticence; in her the will and the power to work were evenly balanced and judiciously exercised, and perhaps in all the village of Sunningford there was not a woman more useful, more respected, or more generally beloved than Hester Heathcote. In her father's house and in the meanest cottage she reigned supreme, rejoicing in a power that was due to her strong consistent character, and won by her quiet acts of benevolence more than even by her great beauty; and perhaps the most striking trait in Hester's character was her unconsciousness of her personal attractions. She knew she was beautiful—what woman would not? and the knowledge was

pleasant to her; but her pride was too great to include vanity, and it was by this very unconsciousness that she doubled her power. And yet another thing: she disdained the appliances of dress, rejecting anything like ostentation or extravagance, and refusing to lend herself to what she called a feminine weakness; and though no one would have better repaid a little care and cost, she always dressed herself in the simplest and soberest manner, and insisted on her sisters following her example, and looking like what they were—a country doctor's daughters: and in this matter Connie was the only rebellious one; for Barbara, distrustful of herself and her power of pleasing, went habited like a little nun. It was this lack of vanity, this utter simplicity, that made Hester so inexplicable to the one set, and so admirable to the other. Girls of her own age could not understand her, and rarely liked her. The quiet coolness of her manner daunted them; the way in which she held herself aloof from their little pleasures and gossips awed and repulsed them. "Miss Heathcote might be a very superior person," they said, "but she was a very disagreeable one, and, with all her haughty superciliousness, was a consummate flirt, though she did try to hide it with her church-goings and visitings; and what men could see in such a dowdily pressed girl that they must all go foolish after her,

old and married men as well as young and eligible ones, except that she had fine eyes and a good figure, beat their knowledge—as though hers was the only pretty face to be found round Sunningford."

These were the remarks of the giddy and envious. It is strange how women manage to detract from the merits of one of their own sex when much admired by men, and yet it holds good on the other side; men often sneer at a girl whom women admire. "That your idea of an interesting-looking woman, my dear; why, I never saw such an insipid-looking face in my life. Amiable, pleasing?—stuff! not a bit of it! She dresses well, and has modest manners; but don't introduce me again, that's all: she hasn't a thing to say for herself." And that cutting censure on one whom perhaps you know to be sweetness and love itself. Barbara once said in her queer way, "If I were a man—and I wish I were—and were looking out for a wife, I would not hazard my own choice, for fear I should be won by a pretty face or a merely pleasing exterior; but I would look out for a woman who was most highly praised by her own sex, and choose her."

"Do it then with your eyes shut, Bab," retorted Leigh lazily, "for she is sure to be old and ugly. My word! don't the women pick holes in one of their own lot who has more than a fair share of good looks? You must think of some other

mode of choosing—this don't pay;" and perhaps in some instances Leigh was right.

For no one for ten miles round Sunningford would have recommended Hester Heathcote, except a few married women, who, being above jealousy, were free to admire Hester's housewifely skill and prudent ways, and who, therefore, quietly agreed with their husbands that he was a happy man who secured her, though they generally added that it was a pity that, with her head and heart, she should fix on a man so beneath her in every way as that Sir Geoffrey Hunsden; though, of course, for a doctor's daughter to marry a baronet was a wonderful rise in life. Still they "did not think that dear Hester was one to care over much for rank, especially as good nature was all that Sir Geoffrey possessed: and, with his great soft head, he was a hundred times more fitted for that silly little Connie."

And so folks talked, and so Barbara believed; and it was this one weakness, this one inconsistency in Hester's character that turned to gall Bab's furious little heart, and bade fair to alienate all her esteem for her sister. For she saw that Hester meant to marry a man whom she could not and would not love; and this was a heinous crime in Bab's eyes, and she despised her for it; and Hester, so proudly reticent, felt Bab's scorn and winced at it, repaying it, not with a generous

confidence, but with an increased hauteur and silence, hiding yet more carefully her poor wounded heart.

For Hester had a secret—a deep and pitiable one, if Barbara had only known it; but, strong in her power of concealment, she had hid her sufferings jealously from every eye, fearing especially Barbara's sharp scrutiny and satire. In this, as was not uncommon, she wronged her.

It was some years ago, when Hester was in her first bloom, Barbara at school, and Connie far too young to notice much that went on around her, there came to the village of Sunningford an Indian officer on sick leave, who put up at the little rustic inn.

Severely invalided, and almost friendless in England, he came down to the old place he had known and liked as a boy, and in a few days' time placed himself under Dr. Heathcote's care.

It was one of the good doctor's peculiarities to make friends with his patients, and benefit their minds, if possible, as well as their bodies. By this means he had a goodly proportion of other people's joys and sorrows laid on his shoulders; and as he not unfrequently relieved many who needed it in a pecuniary way, besides giving his time and services gratuitously, he did not find his profession quite so lucrative as he might have done,

and was often taken to task by his eldest daughter on the duty of charity beginning at home. He soon found out, therefore, in his kindly searching way, that the officer was friendless; lonely, and sad, as well as sick; and with all the generosity of his humane heart, he opened his home to the wayfarer, compelling him to share his hospitality in no ordinary way. And so, day by day, and hour by hour, Hester and Captain Mayhew were thrown together; and Hester, in the benevolence of her heart, ministered to his sick wants, amused and cheered him, much as an affectionate sister might have done, till her fair face became a necessity to him, and he forgot everything in the world but them two. But the awakening came, all too soon. Summer and autumn had passed away, and with the new year he must return to his post; and when the snows of Christmas came, he was suddenly startled to a sense that they must part soon.

Arthur Mayhew was not a young man; he looked older even than his age, and his hair was ploughed with grey; but it was not often given to men to see the like of his good, earnest face, the outward stamp of a noble and selfless nature. They must not part, for he loved her; that was his only thought when the recall came even more hastily than he had feared; he loved her, and he was sure she loved him, and she must come with

him and be his wife. He spoke out suddenly and passionately. He was too hasty and proud, he remembered afterwards when it was too late: it was too much for her; she shrank back from the suddenness, from his changed manner, his impulsive words; she had no time to question her own heart, to know that it was beating even now with a love which she had never felt before, and which was as strong as her own nature; she was afraid of him—afraid of the new unknown life which he offered her; it was all impossible and untrue. "What! leave my home, my parents, my free happy life—all the love and power I have now, and shall win—to follow this stranger, whom I do not know that I love, to the world's end—to that terrible India which I dread—to lead a life of hardship and care? I cannot, I cannot; you ask too much, Captain Mayhew."

In some such language, hasty and hard, she answered him; and he—why are men such fools?—he believed her. Arthur Mayhew was not young, as I have said before; he had lived a life calculated to age any man. He had great knowledge of human nature, great discernment, but he had no experience of women. When he looked down at the shrinking girl before him—at her pale, startled face, and heard her terrified words, he thought he was mistaken—that she did not love him; selfish

and infatuated as he was, to doom a girl of nineteen to his hard wandering life!

"I have made a mistake, Hester," he said, sadly, as he took her hand. "You do not care for me, dear—you cannot; I am old and grey, and you are only a young girl. There, do not tremble; I am going. I will never trouble you more."

So he spoke, the perfect gentleman—the brave soldier; and yet, oh fool! could he not see that her heart was beating with an agony she could not understand? She wanted to speak to him, to bid him stay, to wait for her, to give her time to get over her terror and weigh the sacrifice that, rising up so suddenly before her, seemed to crush her—and he was going.

She raised her eyes, and looked at him through the tears that nearly blinded her, but the calm steadfastness of his bearing daunted her. Did he really love her? Why did he not take her in his arms and soothe this anguish of conflicting feeling? "Oh, forgive me," cried the poor child, and then could say no more.

"I have nothing to forgive," he answered. "God love you, Hester, for I may not. Farewell." And then he stooped and kissed her on the forehead and went.

She could not believe it. She felt confused—in a nightmare. Was he really going? No, he

could not be so cruel. She loved him—yes, she was sure she loved him. Hark! was not that the closing of the hall-door? "Captain Mayhew! Arthur! Arthur!" she cried, and her voice rang quite hoarsely through the open window. He did not hear it; only, as he passed, he lifted his hat to her with a sweet, sad smile, and she never saw the face of Arthur Mayhew again.

Ah, then, indeed, lost in the depths of her despair, Hester found out too late that she loved him—that she would give all she possesssd to have the right to follow him through the world, and then, in the inexperience and innocence of her heart, she did—what burned her cheek long afterwards to think of—she wrote him a letter, and in a few maidenly words told him that she loved him, and prayed for his forgiveness. Alas! that letter never reached him; after wandering far and wide, it came back to her unopened, to be crushed and torn into atoms with passionate tears. Ah, those were wretched days with Hester; but there were sadder ones to come, for six months after he reached Calcutta news came that Arthur Mayhew was dead; he had fallen a prey to a deadly fever, which in his still weak state had seized upon him, and one of the most loving natures the world had ever known had gone to its rest.

Hester made no moan when she heard these

tidings, neither then nor afterwards, though they had the bitterness of death for her: it was not the manner of the Heathcotes to make loud complaint. She drooped and saddened a little, her young face grew colorless and pinched; but she was nursing her dying mother just at that time, and people attributed it to fatigue and grief.

But when Bab returned from school, she thought her sister changed and ailing; she had a cold, and it was neglected and got worse. Dr. Heathcote grew anxious: something was amiss with their girl, the flower of their flock. Something was amiss, indeed; but, during the long and tedious illness that followed, little Bab nursed her with a tenderness and care that surprised them all.

During the weary convalescence that ensued, it would have been well for them both if Hester had confided her secret to her young sister; it would have won Barbara's frank sympathy, and made them friends for life; but Hester was too proud, and so, with all her shrewdness, Barbara discovered nothing. True, Hester turned her face to the wall a good deal and wept many sore, salt tears, and her face for a long time wore a white pining look that no bodily illness could call forth; but Barbara attributed it to the depression of weakness, and only redoubled her efforts to cheer and amuse her.

And so Hester kept her secret bravely, but it

hardened her; she had more religion than Barbara, but it failed at this time to bring her peace. When the first outburst of rebellion and despair had passed, she wearied her soul with the bare dry argument of grief. What had she done that she was to be blighted for life in the first bloom of her youth? How had she deserved so hard a fate, who had always done her duty? Well, happiness was over for her; she should never love again—never! Her heart was buried in Arthur's grave, and so on. Pshaw! who can repeat all the balderdash of a sick girl's fancy; how many and many a child-woman has said the same passionate words as she tramples in the sad open grave of a first love, and turns from it perhaps a little seared and hardened, a little of the sweet freshness gone, to go over it all again, sometimes for joy and sometimes for sorrow.

But Hester's girl-nature was a strong one, and it seared and hardened her indeed; henceforth she would live for duty, for power, but not for love. She would take her dead mother's place, and be her father's friend; she would cherish her beloved Connie, and bear and forbear with Barbara; she would make her young brother happy; and then as time went on, healing her wound and increasing her sense of influence, her ambition took a wider range. There was no wife at the Parsonage: she would be the vicar's right hand; she would assume

the duties and responsibilities, be first at the mothers' meetings, preside over the schools and weekly clubs, and be the lady paramount of the parish: no one should be so respected and looked up to as Miss Heathcote; no one so admired and beloved. Ah, there was some happiness coming to her: she had found her right place at last.

But she must not always be Miss Heathcote. If Hester had one lurking feminine weakness, it was a horror of old maids. It was all very well to remain as she was while she was young and blooming, but it was not good for a woman always to be unmarried,—St. Paul never went as far as that; so she must take the usual lot, and marry when the time came and it was no longer prudent to be single. Though she could not love again, she would take her chance and Sir Geoffrey Hunsden together.

And of all people in the world Sir Geoffrey Hunsden was the last man Hester ought to have married. As Barbara said, it was an affront to her understanding, for what affinity could there be between that strong lofty woman and the easy-tempered fox-hunting young baronet?

To be appreciated Sir Geoffrey ought to have been born in the last century; the times were too advanced and intellectual for him. Nature had formed him for a ploughman, or, better still, a navvy. That vast herculean frame ought to have been clad in fustian;

it would have set off well the great massive head, with its curling hair, and the florid good-humoured face. No one would have supposed from his rough uncouth manners that he was the descendant of a long line of courtly ancestors, and the present lord of the manor.

And yet, to do him justice, the country would would have been the worse without Sir Geoffrey. He was a good landlord, patient and painstaking with his tenants, hospitable and free among his equals, and wholly without vice. He neither drank, betted, nor gamed; and though he had little interest and affection beyond his horses and dogs, he was a good, dutiful son, and devoted the little time he could snatch from his favourite pursuits to his mother's will and pleasure.

Had she been a lady, her influence must have improved him; but she was not one either by birth or education, for Sir Geoffrey's father, having impoverished his estate, retrieved his fallen fortunes by a marriage, or mésalliance as his relatives called it, with the only daughter and heiress of a rich London alderman; and though Lady Hunsden tried to raise herself to his rank, she somehow failed signally in winning either his affection or respect, so after some years she resigned herself to her position, and degenerated into a meek fussy little woman, whose heart was better than her head.

Sir Geoffrey, in his rough way, was very loving and subservient to his mother; therefore, when she pointed out to him the necessity of his taking a wife, as his father had done before him, Geoffry, though not a marrying man, and, if we must speak the truth, singularly adverse to entering into a bond that must curtail, in some degree, his freedom and love of sport, still followed obediently Lady Hunsden's request, and fixed upon Hester, assisted to the choice by his mother's judicious praise and Hester's quiet flattery. He was no more in love than she was, when he came to lay his rank and fortune at her feet; but he admired her hugely, and feared her not a little. "She was such an awfully fine woman," he would exclaim in his coarse way. "Jove! what a figure she had! and how well she would look on horseback!—your tall, slim women always look well in a habit; and then, as Lady H. says"—he generally called his mother Lady H.—"she would look splendid at the head of my table, in the Hunsden diamonds;" and, fired by this last thought, he went down to Dr. Heathcote's with his proposal, couching it in language rather honest than flattering, and with a broad simplicity at which any other woman would have smiled.

Hester did not smile, but she grew pale and rather grave. Arthur Mayhew's earnest face, with

all its manly pleading, rose up before her, and with that memory it was no wonder that Sir Geoffrey's foolish blunders escaped her. To do Hester justice, it was no thought of the Hunsden diamonds, or of the wealth and stately equipage that would be hers, that moved her to make this singular choice; but she thought that, as Sir Geoffrey's wife, she could indulge to the full her thirst for power, and no past Lady Hunsden, however nobly born and gifted, should rival her influence or the good that she would do.

But Sir Geoffrey waited her answer, and it came now—a strange answer, made with a firmness and decision that knew of no appeal.

She was flattered by the proposal, but she did not wish to marry yet, she could not leave her father and her home; and, as she said this, something between a sob and a sigh rose up to choke her; no, she would not marry yet: in two years' time, if Sir Geoffrey were of the same mind, he might ask her again, and she would not say him nay; he would find her ready.

Sir Geoffrey, made rather ardent by the delay, blundered out entreaties, but in vain; and when that strange interview ended, it left them both free and yet fettered, with the understanding that it was not an engagement.

It was over: Hester breathed freely, and was

triumphant; and when Sir Geoffrey came to put two and two together, even he was satisfied he should have his freedom for two years longer; and when that time was expired, he would find a Lady Hunsden to his hand, without the trouble and fuss of courting—a proceeding he very much dreaded.

And so Sir Geoffrey was happy, and his mother too; and it never entered into their foolish heads that, before the two years were over, he might find some one whom even he could love better than his stately Hester, who rather awed and repulsed him —some tender young thing, whose weakness might excite his compassion, and for whom his love might be called forth by his very desire to protect, and then find him bound.

So matters were arranged some nine months before we were introduced to the Heathcotes in the pine-woods, and since then Bab's indignant little heart had risen up in scorn against her sister, and there was not that unity of feeling which promotes peace.

And yet there were times when Bab yearned sorely for it, when she felt lonely and sad; it grieved her to see the perfect understanding, the mutual tenderness, between Hester and Connie, from which she was kept aloof.

Hester was now seven-and-twenty, and Connie ten years younger; it was no wonder that Hester

loved the little fair girl of seventeen, to whom she had acted a mother's part; that she grew to cherish her as something very precious, her one ewe-lamb, while Connie clung to her in return.

Never demonstrative to others, Hester was rarely so even to Connie; but when she took the low stool at her feet, and laid her head against her knee, Hester would stop her work to smooth the pretty yellow curls, and Barbara could see such a look of fondness break over her face that startled even her.

Nay, for her young sister, Hester would even relax her judicious management, and Connie had a sad idle time of it: she would read history, and practise a little in the morning, just as a pretence; but the rest of the day she would be dancing in and out of the house in her broad-brimmed hat, working among her flowers and beehives, or chatting to her father and Norman in the surgery. Barbara chid her frequently and severely, but she always got the worst of it, as Hester invariably took her part; to her, Connie's sillinesses were only beauties. "Leave her alone, Barbara," she would say; "she is only a child: it is time enough to preach wisdom when you practise it yourself."

CHAPTER IV.

LEIGH.

"Call it a heart, and call it strong
As upward stroke of eagle's wing;
Then call it weak, you shall not wrong
The beating thing,
* * * * *
Still youthful mankind, fresh and keen
At danger gazed with awed delight,
As if sea would not drown, I ween,
Nor serpent bite."—*Jean Ingelow.*

"A PENNY for your thoughts, Bab."

Bab shook her head slowly.

"Three-halfpence, twopence, twopence-halfpenny. Come, it is not everybody that would offer such a handsome price; but I always was a generous fellow. Come, make a clean breast; you have been a regular Brownie for the last half-hour."

"'A Rowland for your Oliver,'" retorted Barbara, grimly: "your thoughts must have been travelling off in ten-leagued boots to the possible region of anywhere else, I should think."

"Well, I never! If you are not a nice young woman for a very small tea-party, where everyone

is expected to bring their own spoons. What a spiteful Baby it is! What's up, you uncanny thing?" and Leigh stretched himself on the oriental couch, and looked out drowsily from half-shut lids in a thoroughly Leigh-like manner.

She did look uncanny, to be sure: in the fast-gathering twilight, one could see nothing but a brown bundle and two bright specks of eyes, for all the world like a captured mouse. There was something gruesome and unfit in her attitude, woe-begone and altogether graceless; a pucker of arms, knees, and chin, of eyebrows wrinkling up into low masses of hair, as she rocked herself to and fro on her stool.

"'Little Dame Muffet, she sat on a tuffet, eating of curds and whey,'" continued Leigh, provokingly. "The simile, which I hope you admire, holds good save in one point: in your case the milk of human kindness has turned sour, and, instead of sweet whey, you seem chewing the cud of decidedly acid wisdom."

She laughed—who could help it?—and then frowned herself into sadness again.

"I was thinking," she said, quite seriously—"I was thinking that, waking or sleeping, working or playing, there never was such a good-for-nothing as Leigh Heathcote—a regular 'Taugenichts,' as the Germans have it."

Leigh opened his large eyes and stared through the darkness, too astonished to speak.

"Yes, I can feel them," nodded Barbara, "great, beautiful eyes, that will never light you to your true destiny, but will keep dancing after some 'will o' the wisp,' or some stray meteor, all through your poor little life. Come, you have bought my thoughts, and you shall have them, all hot and spiced as they are, and not a bit sugary;" and so saying she groped her way to him, stool and all, and deposited herself in a fresh bundle by his side.

Leigh strove for his old raillery with a burst. "Why I invoked a Brownie, and, lo and behold! a regular little monster Frankenstein. Hands off, you witch! they feel like warm crawling things in the darkness."

"Leigh, Leigh, you foolish boy, why will you be so ridiculous? Leave off this play of words. I want to speak to you seriously; and afterwards I must tell you a little story."

"The story first, then."

"Fie! Do children have sugar-plums before their medicine? You must have my wholesome bitters first."

"Never mind; I am twisting up a wry face for my own benefit. What perverse imp possesses you this evening, Barbara?"

"There you are getting serious, waxing afraid;

you always are when you say that mouthful—that sheep-bleating word, Barbara. Leigh, Hester told me something this morning, as we were sitting over our work together."

"Hester and you comfortable and confidential! —a miracle! Is the world coming to an end?"

Barbara sneered. Yes, I fear I must say of my faulty heroine that she positively had a wicked little sneer all to herself in the dark; her lips curled themselves into the abominable angle of downward curves, and she laughed a little laugh not pleasant to hear.

"Good gracious, Leigh, how can you be so soft as to believe that! Of course it was an unpleasant confidence or I should not have had it—a disastrous something that permits of a moral."

"Bab, Bab, do you ever repeat the Litany?" What a home-thrust, and from careless Leigh.

She turned it off with a shrug of the shoulder. "You interrupt every sentence," she continued, pettishly. Those thrusts would make themselves felt, do what she would. "Do let me go on quietly. You remember those shares in the Spanish mine that Daddy was in such an excitement about last year, and which were to make all our fortunes?"

"Remember—of course; the governor was wild about them; no one ever saw him so hot and strong

about anything before. What, are they yielding profits already?"

"I don't know—I believe they are; but that is not the question. Daddy has gone and sold out half at a great loss."

"The dickens he has," whistled Leigh, in consternation; "what on earth has he gone and done that for?"

"To pay your college debts," returned his sister, quietly. "I knew that Hester would tell you, and preach about it, and how you would feel it, and all that; so I preferred choosing my own time, and telling you myself. You don't mind my mentioning your old troubles, do you?" she continued, a little anxiously; "you would be sure to hear it from some one else, probably Hester, and she does prose so."

But Leigh was too far gone to thank her for her consideration. "The shares in the Spanish mine sold out, and at a loss, and for me!" he exclaimed, in a truly shocked tone. "Why, they were the El Dorado of my father's dreams; he was to make I don't know what immense profit out of them."

"Yes, I know. He has only sold out half, remember; and to Norman Strath, I believe. Come, come, Leigh, you must not fret about it. I have great faith in old nurse's saying, 'What is, is best.' The oddest part of it is, Hester is rather glad than otherwise."

"Absurd! that is the way with you women; business details are perfect hieroglyphics to you. Tell you a man's bankrupt, whitewashed, etc., you say you're glad; he must be so much cleaner, or some such trash. Hester's a regular ninny."

"No, seriously, Leigh, let us give her her due; she never did approve of these mines—never; and she's very clear-headed about these sort of things."

"That's because she hates speculation."

"Yes, for such men as Daddie. She says they are very often only the cat's paw in the hands of designing directors, and perhaps she is right. She owned she had not a bit of faith in these mines, and wondered Norman Strath could be such a fool as to buy the shares. She only wished they were all gone, even at a loss; and it was a terrible thing to think most of Daddie's professional earnings were laid by in such a treacherous concern, and one of these days we should wake up and find ourselves without anything to look to for the future."

"It is very strange: Hester has generally so much sense," considered Leigh, half shaken, and yet loth to be convinced. "If she believed all this nonsense, why did she not use her influence to persuade my father to sell out at once?—not that I have any faith in a woman's judgment on business matters."

"Ah, I have in Hester's; but she did of course

what you suggest; she was talking to him till twelve o'clock last night."

"Well?"

"Well, it was not a bit of good; he is perfectly bigoted on that point. Distrust Don Alvaro Lopez and his beloved mines, never; he only got hot and angry over it. Hester declared she had never seen him so fierce before."

"The governor fierce; what a lark!"

"Oh, Leigh, I have seen him so once, and I never wish to again; it is too cruel."

"Oh, I forgot," groaned Leigh; and then silence fell on them both. Barbara edged her stool a little closer, and slid her hand under his arm, giving it a sympathetic little squeeze as she did so, to which her brother responded with a sigh.

And here a digression is necessary, lest the reader should apprehend aught of mystery in the sad little secret that pressed upon these two young hearts, only hinted at by Bab's squeeze and Leigh's deep-drawn sigh; and first a word as to the character of this same Leigh.

His was one of those natures which can be briefly summed up in the word contradictory, but which it is necessary to analyse more closely if one would trace the workings of motive and circumstances.

It was strange to see how his many virtues were neutralised and rendered worse than useless by the

vacillations of a will that was its own magnet; yet which veered from point to point with every waif and stray of present feeling.

With all the qualities that make up a noble character, he yet fell far short of even simple mediocrity, and from the want of a true balance and a little rightly directed moral courage his very virtues became faults; in a word, he was the creature of impulse, and so it was that even his bravery became recklessness, and his generosity extravagance; his moods of sweet temper alternated with snatches of sullen caprice, which in turn gave way to fiery outbursts, while the very freshness of his youth, from being fused in the world's crucible, became hot, passionate, and pleasure-loving, which he was at once too indolent to seek, and too morally weak to renounce.

His was the nature that most easily succumbs to temptation, and yet is capable of such depths of contrition and such power of love, that even in the very slough of despond it may find a foothold, wading out by a miracle of manhood, perhaps to fall deeper, or by the help of grace to try again the steep and narrow way. Many are the loving and erring ones who thus make their robes white at the last. Such was Leigh Heathcote, his father's idol, and beloved too by man, woman, and child, to whom his great personal beauty, brilliant parts, and unfailing good nature were powerful recommendations. No

one ever knew Leigh to do a mean action, speak an ill-natured word, or refuse an office of kindness. He might be weak, foolish, something different every day, and nothing long; but he was handsome, merry Leigh, "Gypsy Leigh," as they called him, and that was all.

And so every man, woman, and child round Sunningford knew Dr. Heathcote's son and loved him, speaking gently of the young master's follies, or overlooking them altogether, to talk eagerly of his little kindnesses, "bless his bonnie face and that frank blithe tongue of his;" and Barbara, from the bottom of her silly, faithful heart, adored him, living in an innocent twinship of affection, to which he responded good-humouredly with such measure as he had.

Such was the youth, still almost a boy, who left his father's home and the monotonous every-day little world in which he had hitherto lived, for the brilliant seductions of college life.

Let all impartial parents judge whether this was not a daring experiment for Dr. Heathcote to send out this unfledged boy of his, dangerously alive to his own attractions, eager for life and the excitement of pleasure, yet ignorant what either meant,—to send him out, I say, into the midst of an untried world without preparation and without precaution.

And yet the good doctor thought he was doing

his duty, and that Leigh, with his talents and steadiness, would grow up a great man, and make his own fortune and his sisters' too. "And no one will believe," continued the simple-hearted doctor, "when they see his brilliant career,—no one will believe he was a country doctor's son; they will only remember that he belongs to the Heathcotes, who fell in the Punjaub at the head of their glorious Sikhs." And so without a misgiving, and with many prayers, Dr. Heathcote launched his goodly freight on the sea of life.

Need we follow him, step by step, who know so well the result? Leigh became at once the alternate pet and prey of a large and brilliant circle, which gloried in numbering in its ranks all the titled folly and moneyed extravagance of the whole university; and Leigh's poor little home purse being soon drained, there were plenty of false friends with ready offers of help; so the first downward step was taken, pecuniary liabilities incurred, and, before the poor boy realised his position, he was heavily and hopelessly in debt.

But this was not all. It was just at the close of the first year that one of those disgraceful fracas occurred which sometimes disturb the even tenor of university life.

There was nothing novel in its features,—a giddy wine-party, youthful heads inflamed and maddened

with wine, and resolved on mischief; a street row with the roughs; glorious sallies and a victorious assault. But this time there were graver consequences: a Don had been severely injured, knocked down and trampled under foot in the scuffle, and some said not by accident, as there was a grudge owing; and all the college authorities were up in arms, and justice demanded severest retribution. And so five freshmen—luckless Leigh Heathcote among them—were brought up before their outraged judges and summarily punished. In vain poor Leigh protested, in conscious innocence, that he knew no more of the events they narrated than a babe unborn; in vain he stammered out that he had never seen or touched the injured Don; that Lord Dipsley's champagne had got into his head, and that he had no recollection at all of the evening in question, except that the roughs were letting off fireworks in the quadrangle, and that the squibs were in his head, till he found himself suddenly tucked up between the blankets; and much more to the same purpose. But it was all in vain; circumstantial evidence was against him: he had been seen in the streets in the very thick of the fight by the ringleader's side,—the injured Don himself swore to it: he must go down and swallow his disgrace as he could in a year's rustication.

When the news reached home, Dr. Heathcote

was nearly beside himself. In vain Barbara and even Hester reasoned and pleaded and implored, alleging his youth as an excuse, and hinting at his probable innocence. The doctor would hear nothing, and listen to nobody.

"A Heathcote to disgrace himself so!—my son, my only son drunk, in a common street row in the midst of blackguards and prize-fighters—the boy I would have trusted with untold gold!" And for all his grey hairs, the old man could have found it in his heart to lift up his voice and weep. His grief was terrible. To his old-fashioned sense of integrity and honor, his son had eternally disgraced himself, and, in a lesser degree, his own father too. He could never lift up his honest head again in the village; he hung it in a sad, crest-fallen manner when the fathers of other boys passed him; his grey hair grew white with his trouble, and unwonted lines wrinkled his broad forehead. He, who had hitherto none but loving and tender words for all his children, now spoke brusquely to his daughters, drawing tears from their eyes by the very sternness of his rebukes. "You have all spoilt that boy," he would say; "you have made him a fool among you; and now look what you have made of him, a drunkard,—a Heathcote a drunkard! I thank Heaven your mother never saw this day! I thank Heaven she was spared this! It would have brought her earlier to the grave,

as it will bring me, ungrateful boy that he is!" Ah! what had become of Dr. Heathcote's clear sense and sweet temper, that he could forget his own share of the blame, and lay it on his innocent daughters? Barbara waxed mad under these unjust reproaches; she knew how this delay of his father's forgiveness must add to Leigh's trouble; she thought of him hiding away in his poor little lodging some few miles from Oxford, not daring to come home till he was sent for; thought of him till her heart bled, and she grew pallid and sick with pain.

"Is the poor boy never to be forgiven?" she would cry; "we will take all the blame, Hester and I, if you will only have him home again, and not let him be alone there with his broken heart. Oh, father, how can you be so hard? If a man falls once," gasped out the little sister, with kindling eyes, "is he never to have a helping hand, is he never to rise again? You have helped to spoil him, father; you are more to blame than he."

"Oh, Barbara, how can you!" exclaimed Hester, terrified.

"Nay, she is right," returned Dr. Heathcote; and his mouth lost all its sweet curves in its sternness; "but it well becomes my daughter to tell me so;" and at that richly deserved rebuke Barbara's fiery little nature dissolved in tears, and she threw herself on Daddy's neck in unfeigned contrition,

but all in vain—neither Barbara's reckless courage, Hester's reasoning, or Connie's endless fretting availed anything; it was honest Geoffrey Hunsden who at last managed to make the unhappy father see it in a more reasonable light.

"Why, 'pon my honour, doctor," he said one day, in his blundering way, when he came upon the miserable little conclave just broken up by one of Bab's furious outbursts, "'pon my honour, you should look at this thing like a reasonable man."

"Of course, Sir Geoffrey," answered Dr. Heathcote, with a queer, fierce sort of satire, "I am to like my son to be a drunkard, I am not to be ashamed of it, or of him either, at least so Barbara tells me."

"'Pon my honour, Barbara's a sensible little creature, and means well; don't scold her, doctor; she and Hester both mean well. We all think, we do, indeed, sir, that you are too hard on this poor lad."

"It is the first time in my life, if I am," replied the father, grimly.

"Well, you know, of course, you must be angry at first, and all that; but, as Lady H. said to me the very minute before I came out, 'The good doctor must remember he's only a lad for all that.' Those were her very words, doctor."

"Humph! I don't see that age, or want of age,

offers any excuse; look at his bringing up, Sir Geoffrey."

"Yes, that's just what we do look at," returned simple Geoffrey; "it is not as though the fellow had any knowledge of the world, or anything like that. 'Pon my word, I believe he was as innocent as Dame Crumpton's last baby. That's just what I want to come to."

"Well, well! I am following you," interrupted the doctor impatiently; he was growing testy of late.

"Well, as I was saying," continued the young baronet, growing redder and redder, and stammering in his eagerness, "Lady H. and I both agree that his wasn't the right sort of bringing up."

"Thank you," began the doctor, angrily; but Hester came to her lover's rescue.

"Father, you are interrupting him; please, hear what Geoffrey means to say."

"I certainly meant no offence, doctor. I will take my affidavit of it; it is only my blundering way of putting things: what I mean is, that the lad had a sort of old woman's education; he never went to school, never mixed much with other fellows; learnt from his sister's governess, or what you and the vicar—an old woman himself—could teach him; that's what I mean by his bringing up; and, 'pon honour," continued Sir Geoffrey, waxing eloquent in his earnestness, "to turn a fellow like

that, with all his ignorance of the world, into the midst of a gay university!—well, if he hadn't gone wrong, with his attractions and—what do you call it?—want of ballast, you know, featherheadedness, &c., why, it would have been a miracle, by Jove! it would."

"Do you think so?" said the doctor, shaken, in spite of himself, by Sir Geoffrey's rough eloquence.

"Think so—that's just it. If you would only look at it like a reasonable man. Why, the lad is nothing but a cat's-paw in the hands of Dipsley and Saunders. I know the crew. Why, perhaps they drugged his wine to make him drunk, you know."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Dr. Heathcote, "you don't say so."

"Yes I do; it is all as plain as a pikestaff. Wanted him to do some of their dirty tricks; knew he was a Heathcote, too honourable, by Jove; invited him to a wine, drugged his champagne. Bless you, Lady Hunsden told me all about it. They did it to my father once, and he cudgelled them soundly for it; one of 'em—Barnes it was, General Barnes—never forgot his licking, and serve 'em right, too—the brutes."

"Good heavens!" again exclaimed the doctor, but his tone was mild, and his face was radiant with joy. "Drugged his wine; a Heathcote too honourable. I never thought of that before. Give me

your hand, Geoffrey; you are a good fellow," and the doctor drew his hand across his eyes.

"And you'll have him home," hazarded Geoffrey. It was well to strike while the iron was hot. "It is no good leaving him to get wild over it all; it hardens a fellow so, and then if you like he might get the wrong bit in his mouth."

"True, true, you are right, Geoffrey. I've been too hard on the poor boy. Come and kiss me, Bab; we'll have him home, and pay his debts; it shan't be my fault if he hasn't another chance."

"Then why not write to him at once, sir?" suggested Geoffrey, cunningly, "and I'll post the letter; I'm riding into Brackley by-and-by."

"A good thought and a kind one. Yes, yes, I'll go and do it at once. 'Let not the sun go down upon your wrath.' I have let too many go down on mine. Come in in half-an-hour's time for the letter;" and the doctor bustled off to the little brown room at the end of the passage, full of musty books and cabinets of curious minerals, which was known in the house as the doctor's study. As the doors closed upon him, Hester moved quietly across the room and took Sir Geoffrey's hand, pressing it softly in both her own.

"Thank you, Geoffrey," she said, and the tears shone in her eyes; "you have stood our good friend;" and really at that moment something of

reverence and tenderness stole into Hester's frozen-up heart for the man whom she had set herself to marry.

It ought to have been a proud moment for her lover to see the beautiful glow on Hester's face, and to feel the warm pressure of her hands; but to the disgrace of humanity it must be said that never was a young man more embarrassed than he as he stood growing redder and redder, holding her hand loosely, with a painful uncertainty as to what he was expected to do with it, till he dropped it awkwardly at last.

"'Pon honour," cried honest Geoffrey, as he rode down the Brackley lanes, wiping the heat from his brow, "I don't know how it is, but her very kindness seems to awe and take the spirit out of a fellow, there's something so tremendous in her way of doing it; by Jove, she is a splendid woman! quite a picture, you know; but, however, she will condescend enough to marry me, and what I shall do with her when I've got her, by Jove, I don't know. I must leave all that to Lady H.;" and with a sigh that ended in a whistle the luckless wooer dismissed the subject from his mind.

"Did I not tell you what a noble heart there was under all that simplicity?" cried Hester, triumphantly, to her sister, as soon as they were left alone. "Here have you and I been wearing and fretting

ourselves to death over this miserable business without doing any good, and Geoffrey comes in and settles everything with the greatest ease, just by an honest suggestion or two."

"He is a very good fellow," returned Barbara; "and it is not his fault that he is so slow and stupid; but of course in your position, Hester, you must find out more virtues in him than other people can." So spoke ungrateful Bab, and as she spoke a frown settled down on Hester's fair face—a frown that said as plainly as it could, that this should be her last, as it was her first confidence.

And so Leigh came home. The few days' waiting had hardened him as Geoffrey said, and he came prepared to brave it out as recklessly as he could. But when he saw the altered look on Dr. Heathcote's face, all the spirit of his manhood died out of him, and he fairly threw himself into his father's arms, with the bitter sobs of a child, "Father, I have been very wicked."

"Hush, hush, my son;" but the doctor's eyes were dim as he said it. "Let us forgive, Leigh, as we hope to be forgiven; the good God knows what need we all have to say that," and so he comforted him.

And so Leigh was forgiven, and reinstalled in his father's favour; but, perhaps, those first few days at home were the most wretched he had ever known.

It pained him—for Leigh had a tender heart—to see the lines of care on his father's face, and to mark how his old gaiety had left him, and what effort it cost him to say the cheerful nothings that once made the fun of the family circle; but this was only a part of the trial. The day following the reconciliation, Dr. Heathcote called his son into the study, and gravely, but kindly, asked him for a list of his debts.

"Every one, and to the uttermost farthing, Leigh, though they cost me half my earnings; truth, truth, and nothing but truth. Let us put a brave face on the matter, and then, and not till then, we shall breathe freely."

And Leigh did as he was bid, though it was the bitterest pill he had ever swallowed in his life; in his ignorance of monetary matters, the sums that he was found to have spent, the liabilities that he had incurred, seemed incredible, and nearly scared him out of his senses.

"Have I ruined you, father?" he would say piteously, every now and then; and the doctor, smiling down his own bitter fears, would answer hastily, "No, no, Leigh, don't look so frightened; I have a sum laid by for a rainy day, and, God helping, my son, we will never see one so rainy as this again."

"No, indeed," interrupted Leigh, eagerly. "I

will never get into debt again, father; never, I will swear to it, I would starve rather." And to do him justice, Leigh to a great extent kept his word.

Things grew brighter by-and-by, sunshine stole back into the old home, and Leigh soon found congenial employment. It fell out in this wise:

Sir William Travers—one of Doctor Heathcote's most influential patients—struck by Leigh's pleasing exterior and winning manners, offered to engage him as tutor to his only son; and though the doctor, scrupulous to a fault, laid a full account of Leigh's high crimes and misdemeanours before his worthy patron — even unconsciously exaggerating and making the most of them in his chivalrous nicety, Sir William chose to ignore the knowledge, and reward the culprit.

"I don't think much of a young fellow, just over twenty, getting into a scrape like that,—hundreds do; besides, he has been sorry, and done his penance, and there the matter ought to lie. I like him; he has good abilities, a tolerable temper, and that's enough. You see, it will be a great thing for me to get a young fellow like him to trim Rolf, for the boy, what with his sickly health, and from being brought up with girls and governesses, is a regular milksop, and I want a tutor who will put up good-humouredly with his dunceship, and teach him to ride, and hunt, and fish; and if I don't mistake, it

is just the life that will suit Master Leigh," and to this latter clause the doctor could not fail to assent.

And so for some two or three hours of the day Leigh dragged his reluctant pupil through a sort of classical A B C, and then—what was far more congenial to both—taught his charge to ride, shoot, and fish, or put him through the mysteries of cricket and other athletic sports. It was an easy, gentlemanly life, and brought him into close acquaintance with Sir William's splendid hunters; but it had this drawback, it left him too much master of his time, and with many unoccupied hours on his hands; and this, to one of Leigh's temperament, was in itself, a great evil, for from the beginning of time Dr. Watts' simple adage holds good that—

> "Satan finds some mischief still
> For idle hands to do;"

and for idle brains too. One could easily predict before Leigh had been many months at home, that his giddy head and impulsive nature would lead their owner astray again.

CHAPTER V.

DORT'S MILL.

"And as I entered, an ineffable face
Met mine upon the threshold."
E. B. Browning.

THE silence had lasted some minutes between the brother and sister, and Bab's little hand had travelled many times up and down Leigh's coat-sleeve in a sort of mesmeric sympathy, before the latter roused himself from his unusual abstraction.

"Yes, that's the way with you women," he said in a sort of vexed tone; "hit a fellow when he's down. Choose out the tender part, you know, and make him feel. Bless you, it's the way of the world."

"Leigh, how can you speak so unkindly?" cried Barbara, and the indignant tears sprang to her eyes in the darkness. "I only told you because I fancied I could do it without hurting your feelings, and you would be sure to hear it from some one else. Next time I will leave it for Hester."

"I didn't mean you, Babchen," interrupted her brother soothingly, and he gave her the rough kiss

which was his only mark of fondness. "Why, every one knows what a faithful little soul you are. What I meant was that I understand now all Hester's hints and inuendoes, and the sudden new primness of her ways. 'We must all try to be less extravagant, Leigh; father has had many calls on him lately. I would not ask him to buy a new horse if I were you,' and so on,—all sorts of little goody speeches, that riled me so. Hester has the trick of riling a fellow, and no mistake. She lays down the law so."

"Yes, she does; but I know she means it for the best," replied Barbara, good-humouredly; for, by some nameless but generous instinct, she never allowed any one to attack Hester but herself. "I suppose she fancied you needed the warning because of this."

"Yes, give a dog a bad name and hang him," grumbled Leigh. "I declare I should often cut up rough over Hester's prudent speeches, if it were not that she is so confoundedly handsome."

Barbara felt a twinge that amounted to pain.

"Do you mean that that makes any difference in a sister?" she asked in a stifled voice. "You can't mean that, Leigh?"

"Why not, I should like to know? Why should a fellow be blind to his own sister's beauty? When Hester smiles, and looks you full in the face with

her great grey eyes, I often think the fellow's lucky who gets her."

"Indeed," observed Barbara, coldly, and she edged a little further away.

"Yes, indeed, and indeed, little jealousy," and Leigh pinched her cheek. "There's a pleasing tone, and which reveals the true nature of the animal. Now you're cross because you've not got Hester's satin skin or Connie's cream and roses."

"I wish—oh, I wish I were handsome, if it were only for your own sake, Leigh!" burst out from Barbara's full heart, beating now with envious pain.

Leigh laughed, but not unkindly. "Oh, the vanity of the creature! just listen to her. Handsome, indeed! Well, you're not handsome, Bab; I can't say that you are even pretty, but I would not change your little face for either of theirs."

"Leigh!"—oh, the start of joy.

"No, indeed. You did not think I would, did you? Somehow you've got a talking face, Bab, and that pleases me."

"A talking face! that sounds nice. By-the-bye, that reminds me I have forgotten all about my story."

"What story?" yawned Leigh. "Ah, but it's getting late, and I'm awfully sleepy, Bab."

"No, you're not; and it's just the nice time for telling an adventure, and nobody wants us downstairs."

"An adventure! Is it an interesting one? Well, fire away, Dame Muffet, I'm all attention;" and Leigh composed his drowsy head comfortably on the cushion.

"I can't say once upon a time, because it occured yesterday afternoon," began Barbara in a relishing tone; "but as I was walking down the Brackley lanes, near Dort's Mill, I met a little child running right in the middle of the road."

"And you put her on the side-path and walked on," interrupted Leigh. "Bother the child; get on, faster, Bab."

"But I can't get on without the child, because my adventure concerns her," remonstrated Bab. "Now you've put me out before I've begun."

"What an Irish speech, and what a stupid adventure, and what a silly you must be to repeat it!" exclaimed Leigh; but Barbara in a high voice silenced him.

"She was running right in the middle of the road, not ten yards from a great brewer's cart that was coming down upon her as fast as two fat horses could trot, and the brewer's man asleep in his red nightcap. I was just turning round by the plantations when I met it, and it made me giddy for a moment. Of course I had the wee thing on the path in a trice—but, oh, dear!——"

"It is an 'oh, dear' indeed," groaned Leigh.

"It was such a beautiful little gipsy of a child," proceeded Barbara, perfectly ignoring him, "with her scarlet hood falling on her neck, and tangled brown hair, with such dimpled shoulders heaving out from her print frock."

"Some beggar's brat, I suppose."

"No, nor a lady's child either, but very clean and respectable for all that; well, I questioned the wee mite, holding her fast by the hand, lest she should escape from me;—who was she? where was her mother? where did she live? &c.; but to all my interrogations I only got the bewildering and mysterious answer, lisped out in such a baby voice—

"'Ta feyther has taken the ittle pinky shrimp, and Winnie wants to play with 'em.'"

"Pshaw! what trash! Who wants to hear baby-talk?"

"I must tell it in my own way," returned Barbara, decidedly; "it's no good your being so impatient, Leigh. Well, I talked and I coaxed till I was weary, but I elicited nothing more than 'The feyther's ittle pinky shrimp, the curly-tailed fish with the black whiskers, eyes like Winnie's—Winnie a good ittle gell; Winnie love ittle pinky shrimp to play with 'ou,' till I gave it up in despair." Leigh laughed scornfully. "I gave it up in despair, but cunning came to my aid. I professed a great inte-

rest in the pinky shrimps, was sure Winnie was a good girl, and father would let her play with it, and then blandly suggested that they were both waiting for us in the front parlor at home, and we must go home fast, or they would be gone. The bait acted wonderfully. Winnie took her thumb out of her mouth, relinquished my hand, and commenced whisking down a side lane with marvellous celerity, as fast as her little legs would carry her; her scarlet hood and brown curls streaming behind, and her dimpled fists cutting the air bravely, and so fast did the little maiden trot along that I only caught her just as she was turning into Dort's Mill."

"Into Dort's Mill, did you say?" interrupted Leigh, with the first tone of interest that Barbara had heard yet.

"Yes; I thought you were asleep, Leigh, and that I was only telling my story to Ben. Well, you know Dort's Mill? It has passed into other hands within the last two or three months. It's a square white house, standing in the middle of a neatly-kept kitchen garden, which divides it from the mill itself."

"As if everybody round Sunningford did not know Dort's Mill! What a goose you are, Barbara!"

"I'm telling my story in my own way. Well, my charge trotted down the side-walk, and round

the flower-beds, and into the little front passage, and then stood on tip-toe and essayed to turn the handle of a door on the right-hand side. Here, however, I interposed, taking down her chubby hands, and giving a timid knock instead. 'Come in!' said a clear, sweet voice, and Winnie and I went into——oh, Leigh! such a kitchen! such a regular, dear, old farm-house kitchen as I have dreamt of, but never seen in my life!"

"Yes, I know—at least, get on," yawned Leigh; but the yawn was less sleepy than hitherto.

"There was a great sunny lattice wide open, and looking on to beehives and apple-trees, and a wide fire-place, with immense settles round it, dressers loaded with gaily painted china and pewter mugs that shone like silver, and a creeping baby on the rug, with a fat puppy lying on its back beside him, with one of his worsted shoes in its mouth, and at the window a young woman sat sewing, and singing a low tune, while she softly rocked an empty cradle. On seeing a stranger enter with the child, she dropped her work and rose with a curtsey; it was then she turned her face on me, and, O Leigh! it was just the most beautiful face I have ever seen."

"Come, this is getting interesting," interrupted Leigh, pretending to stretch himself; "get on, and don't be prosy, Barbara."

"I never felt less prosy in my life. I wish I

could make you see that face, but I don't know how to begin." Then, as an odd little laugh sounded out of the darkness: "I know you distrust my descriptive powers, but I will give you some idea of her for all that. She was such a grand-looking creature, and yet so calm, with such splendor of dimensions, such a noble bust, and her face pale and beautiful, and yet so grave! If she had been a little darker, her eyes, and hair, and skin, I mean, she would just have reminded me of Ruth when Boaz lighted upon her among the reapers. I always fancied her sweet, widowed beauty something like this, only more Oriental."

"And with a hook nose, I suppose."

"Don't be profane, and mar such a pretty picture as I have drawn for you. I think her face would have been too white and passive, but for her eyes; but they were so lovely! Do you know, Leigh, they reminded me of a cow's?"

Leigh burst into a loud, boisterous laugh.

"There is really nothing to laugh at. If you had only stood, as I have, for ten minutes at a time, watching Farmer Dyloe's beautiful Alderney chewing the cud under the apple-trees, on a summer's afternoon, you would understand what I mean, and own to the truth of the simile. There was the same lustrous, far-away, patient look in her eyes, speaking and yet dumb, that the Alderney had as she

looked placidly across the paling at me, chewing her sweet second repast."

"And what did this cow-like creature say to you?"

"Oh Leigh, don't! You could not talk so if you had only seen her. Well, Winnie opened the conversation in her usual style, by running across the kitchen and pulling her gown, lisping out, 'Oh, mammie, Ruth, feyther's taken away Winnie's ittle shrimp.' The young woman smiled, and patted the curly head, and then turned to me.

"'I have found your little girl in great peril,' I replied, answering her look; 'she was running down the Brackley lane right in the middle of the road, not many yards from a great brewer's cart, and the horses were trotting right upon her.'

"The young woman uttered an exclamation, and snatched the child to her breast, holding her tightly, and smothering her with kisses, though the little one murmured and tried to get free.

"'Naomi, Naomi!' she cried, and at the call another person entered the kitchen, whom I saw at once was the mother; a pale, sickly-looking young woman, deeply marked with the small-pox, but with a gentle, pleasing expression. 'Naomi, our Winnie has been in danger, and this young lady has saved her and brought her home. She was nearly under the wheels of a great brewer's cart. Think, sister,

if Paul had come home and found his little girl a crushed and bleeding corpse,' and she strained the child closer in her tender arms, making pitying little moans over her, while the little maid only struggled harder to be free.

"'The good God is always merciful,' returned the mother quietly, but her pale face grew a shade paler. 'He has saved Paul and me often from pain. Give me his baby, Ruth,' and her eyes had a fond hungry look in them—a mother's look, Leigh—till Ruth put the child in her arms. It was strange then to watch the quiet mesmerism of her look and touch; for the little creature ceased at once to fret and struggle, and nestled down into her bosom as her rightful resting-place.

"'She has often given us the slip before,' said Ruth, 'but never wandered so far away. She has been playing in the kitchen with some lobsters Paul was taking into town. She must have followed him in the hope of going with him and seeing them again. All creatures alive or dead, birds, beasts, or fishes, are Winnie's rightful playfellows. But I am keeping you standing; sit down, Miss Heathcote, for you must be weary with your long run.'

"'You know my name, then,' I returned, surprised.

"'Yes,' she stammered out; and all of a sudden such a color came into her face, not a pretty

ordinary blush, Leigh, but a great rush of crimson blood, that swept across her whole face and neck, but it was gone in a moment. 'Yes,' she continued, more composedly, as she took up her sewing again, 'I have seen your sister at the school; and of course there is a family likeness. I knew you were one of Dr. Heathcote's daughters. Besides, I have seen you at church.'

"'I am sure I have never seen you before,' I returned, decidedly.

"'No, I dare say not. I have only been at Dort's Mill a few weeks. My father is dead, and since my brother went away I have come to live with my sister and brother-in-law. My name is Ruth Canham, and you will know me soon well enough, for I am elected as village schoolmistress.'

"'You don't say so,' I returned in great astonishment; "you are the new mistress then whom Hester was so full of. I remember, she sang your praises all dinner-time.'

"Again the same rush of color, the same returning paleness. Then she sat and sewed in silence. I drew my chair a little nearer to her and the open window, and sipped a mug of cider that Naomi had thoughtfully brought for my refreshment, and looked out on the beehives and the apple-trees, marvellously well content, while Naomi drew down her sleeves and fastened them neatly, for she had been washing

in the outer kitchen, and sat down near us. Winnie, now pacified, joined the infant group on the rug. I don't know why, but it seemed as if I had known them for years. A sort of sunshiny peace seemed to break over me: I could have sat there for hours."

Was it a sigh or a yawn that broke from sleepy Leigh? Barbara did not hear it.

"There was a gravity on Ruth's face, and a sort of chastened uncomplaining sadness on Naomi's, that seemed to forbid any loud or merry talk. I know I quite hushed my voice as I said—

"'I hope you like your new post, Miss Canham?'

"'Nobody calls me Miss Canham, not even the children,' she answered. 'I am always Ruth; please remember that, Miss Heathcote. Yes, I love my children and my duties already.'

"'She is almost wearyful in her love of babies,' said Naomi, in that sleepy placid voice of hers; 'look at her now.' And she pointed to Ruth's foot, that still moved at intervals the rocker of the empty cradle. 'She will go on like that for hours, singing away, and never minding that Reuben is safe on the rug or in my arms. Sister, you will never rest till you have your own arms full.'

"Again the sensitive rush of colour; but Ruth's tone was playful.

"'Come down to the school sometimes, Naomi, just before midday, and you will see my arms full

enough, two or three little ones creeping into them, and another two or three asleep on the hem of my gown. God bless them all, say I.'

"'But it wearies you, Ruth,—never deny it,—these ten days past, since you first commenced your new work, I see you quieting and sobering down—none of the old songs—nothing so light a step; and such a tired face, Miss Heathcote, when she comes in from her evening stroll down the lane. She loves a breath of evening air, and a peep at the shining stars, does Ruth.'

"Ruth, plucking at her thread, broke it, and stooped for a fallen reel. Every now and then as Naomi talked, her large brown eyes came back from their far-away look, and gave me quick, searching glances. I felt she was measuring me with Hester; yet some trick of my face pleased her, for she finished her scrutiny with a little smile.

"'Ruth is very difficult,' went on Naomi, in her simple way. 'It does seem hard for her, who was the spoilt child at Dairymead Farm,—that was our old home, Miss Heathcote,—and never did anything, till the brother went wrong and everything was sold up and went to ruin,—it does seem hard for her to fash and slave herself with other folks' children, while all the time she has a brother and sister who would share their last crust with her, and keep her like a lady.'

"Ruth raised her earnest face and, looked at her sister. 'Naomi!' she said, warningly.

"'Nay; I appeal to Miss Heathcote, she has a kind, true face, and does not seem above talking to simple mill-folk. Is it not wrong of Ruth, all for just a little bit of pride and some palaver about Paul not being her own brother—though I am sure he treats her as though he were—to fag herself with this new school business, and she not strong, and taking after the mother, who died long before she was my age, when she might bide comfortable with me and the children?'

"I looked at Ruth without answering, studying for a minute a face that was certainly as proud as it was pure.

"'You have lived with her all her life," I said, at length; 'but I, who am a stranger, read her better than you do. She would rather starve than owe her living to her brother-in-law.'

"Ruth darted a strange, wistful look at me.

"'Thank you, Miss Heathcote. I see I have found a friend. You are one who can grasp truth in an instant. Naomi, you must believe me now. I love you, I love Paul and your children dearly, I would work for you—beg for you—die for you if needful; but I could not live here happily, making your home my home—my own happy home,' she added, with an emphasis, 'unless you suffer

me,'—with a little laugh—'to bring my own grist to the mill. We are not rich,—nay, why should we hide it?—we are very poor, hampered, as all beginners are, and struggling. But there, I think we have troubled a stranger long enough with our affairs. Change the subject, Naomi, please.'

"Only a small farmer's or, rather, a yeoman's daughter, and such delicacy of feeling, such refinement of speech. I gazed at these two singular women with the strange longing to become better acquainted with them—to know them intimately—to be their friend, in fact; and as I rose to take leave something of this wish escaped me.

"'May you come and see us again, my dear young lady?' returned Naomi, much gratified. 'As often and for as long as you like: you are always welcome. Are you not our Winnie's preserver?'

"'Come, for you are welcome for your own sake,' added Ruth, abruptly, with one of her strange looks: and she pressed my offered hand warmly.

"'I will, I will,' I answered her cordially; and I will come and see you at your school, and bring my great dog, Ben, to amuse the children.' And so ended my first visit to Dort's Mill."

"And a very pretty adventure it was, and very nicely narrated," said Leigh, rousing himself into an upright posture; but his voice had something odd and forced in it. "I will look out for this

handsome new schoolmistress of yours and Hester's at church, and tell you in the sermon-time if I think she comes up to my notion of a thorough-bred Alderney."

For which facetious remark, which, in a figurative sense, was the last straw that broke the camel's back, Barbara fell upon him tooth and nail, to the accompaniment of Ben's strangled bark, till Connie came up with Doctor and Miss Heathcote's compliments to know what all that noise meant.

CHAPTER VI.

AN EVENING AT OAKLEIGH COTTAGE.

" O toil and woe, O love and death !
At least we know ye are not all !
Life but begins with passing breath,
Fruition lies beyond the goal ;
So turn we to the toilsome plain
By sorrow scathed, but purified,
And lift our burdens up again
As those whom God has touched and tried."

Helen Marion Burnside.

It was a pleasant warm afternoon, such as one rejoices in, in the early summer, when Hester sat sewing at one of the windows of Heathcote House. I speak advisedly, for, notwithstanding its small pretension and old-fashioned shabbiness, the house bore the family name, and Heathcote House, or Heathcote, as it was oftener called, was as well known for ten miles round as St. Ronans, Hunsden Park, or even Briarsley—the residence of the great Sir William Travers; and it spoke well for the ancient respectability of the family that generations of fathers and sons, many of them doctors, and all

professional men, had lived, married, and died in the old house.

It was growing very ancient now. The rooms they had modernised were about as successfully renovated as old age when it puts on the garb of youth. Some two or three of the oldest rooms were shut up, being quite unfit to live in; and it was the doctor's one innocent pride and guileless wish, that when, in the old Scripture phrase, "he should be gathered to his fathers," Leigh should build a new and grander Heathcote on the site of the old house—a fond fancy, and well-nigh a hopeless one, founded on his imperfect knowledge of his son's character.

The room in which Hester sat was one of those in which very doubtful improvements had been effected, to the loss of all Barbara's patience, who had stigmatised them as "vile patcheries," and an affront to all good taste. It was a long dark room, very narrow and low-ceiled, as were they all, and the heavy oak wainscoting and old-fashioned recessed windows had been in perfect harmony with the whole. But Hester had declared that one room at least should be modernised and made habitable; and though the lowness and narrowness were unalterable, yet French windows, gilt paper, and handsome carnation chintz should work wonders; and if her father would only let her whitewash

that hideous painted ceiling, full of smoke-dried sprawling Cupids, and replace the high wooden mantelpiece with a marble one, he would see what an elegant modern drawing-room she would make.

But the doctor, though he had yielded with a sigh to some of the improvements suggested by his enterprising daughter, was firm on the subject of the painted ceiling and carved mantelpiece, as he declared the former a work of art, and the latter a carving of no ordinary degree. Moreover, he stipulated that the dining-room and his own study should be left just as they were, and only the women's apartments, as he contemptuously termed the drawing-room and breakfast-room, should be remodelled to Hester's fancy.

And so Hester and Connie had a time of it, and revelled in chintzes and papers to their hearts' content; but, as might be supposed, the whole was a failure. The gilt and flock papers hung on the walls as gaudily as a ball-dress on an old belle. The sprawling Cupids and simpering deities, though scrubbed and scoured, looked smokier and grimier than ever, exposed to the full light of the handsome French windows. The large-flowered carpet made the room narrower, and not even the crimson-covered couches, artfully disposed, hid its many angles and recesses, while the tall blackened

chimney-piece, with its heavy mouldings and grotesque carvings, yawned dark and cavernous, a gloom in a sea of light. It was a miserable failure, and so unutterably provoking that Hester sat down and had a good cry—a rare thing in quiet self-composed Hester, moved thereto by Barbara's ill-concealed triumph; and then it was that Leigh and Bab, in their mischievous way, christened the old drawing-room by the name of the Piebald or Harlequin room. It was a life-long lesson to the young housekeeper. Hester never modernised again.

But on such an afternoon as this in question not even the Harlequin drawing-room could look otherwise than cheerful, with its three French windows opening on the green lawn, with the shadowed brightness beyond, and the early June roses peeping out of the ivy, and tapping at the window-panes. Who looked at soiled Cupids or misplaced clusters of oaken grapes, when they could gaze out at that long leafy lawn, at mighty oaks, horse-chestnuts and stately old elms? The only wonder was that Connie, stretched out on one of the carnation couches, did not betake herself instead to some soft mossy seat between the old tree-boles, and that Hester could sit and stitch so steadily without one glance at all that glory of greenery. If it had been Barbara, she would have been up and chasing the great purple

butterfly that was floating so idly down the long aisle like a wind-stirred flower, or she would have been watching the brown bees, as they filled their honey-bags, making sweet hummings as they sipped their floral chalices. She would not have sat and sewed so quietly while the cuckoo was wooing her with his bright spring song, and all the twittering, tumbling martens were abroad.

There was a weary heated look on Hester's face, and her forehead was contracted with a frown, as though in pain. Every now and then her eyes fell on the piles of new muslin curtains that strewed the carpet around her. One could see her work fatigued, its magnitude oppressed her.

The door opened and Barbara entered, dressed for walking; as fresh as a rose, and with a bright expectant look on her face.

"Adieu, good people. There, what a worry! I've broken the loop of my new grey glove."

Hester ceased her weary calculations—she was counting the unfinished piles, and looked up in some displeasure.

"Where in the world are you going, Barbara?"

"That's tellings, as Leigh says," laughed Barbara.

She did not in the least mean to be provoking; it was just her saucy way, and she was so happy; but Hester looked displeased for all that.

"I know it is useless to hope for a sensible answer from you, Barbara; but I think you might have told me you were going out a little earlier than this. Here I have got all this work down expecting you to come and help me every minute, but it's like your consideration!"

"Can't Connie help?" answered Barbara, shortly. "I suppose she could hem those curtains as well as lie on a sofa and read 'David Copperfield.' She has a nice idle life of it, I must say."

"There you are; always at that poor child," returned Hester, fretfully. It was so hot, and the piles looked larger than ever. "Of course she will help when I want her. That is no excuse for you to go out and enjoy yourself, and leave just when there is work to be done."

"I offered my services yesterday, and was refused, Hester," retorted Barbara, biting her lips, and trying hard not to lose her temper. "Connie, you had better shut up that book, and run and fetch your thimble; Hester wants you,"

"If Hester wants me, she can tell me so," answered Connie crossly, and not offering to move: of all things she hated work the most.

"Well, well," returned Barbara impatiently, "you both seem in a pleasant mood this afternoon; however, you must do the best you can. I can't

offer to stop, for I have an engagement; and, Hester, you may tell Daddie that he need not send Leigh to fetch me, for Mrs. Strath is sure to send some one home with me."

"Mrs. Strath! always Mrs. Strath. I declare, Barbara, you almost live there. I can't say it's the best taste in the world, considering Norman's position here; and I wonder father likes it—I don't."

"Then you may dislike it. Good-bye, Hester. I am sorry you object to my little pleasure, but it's nothing new;" and so saying, Barbara, nodding fiercely, shut or rather slammed the door—a fact which did not improve Hester's poor aching head.

Well, it was hard and undeserved, and Barbara felt it so. Here she felt so happy and looked so nice, and now everything was damped and spoiled as usual—a cloud on her little fête. She had so determined to enjoy herself this bright June afternoon, and she had felt such pleasure in dressing herself. She had put on her soft grey dress, her one silk—her "go-to-meeting gown," as she called it—and her best lace ruffles—real Valenciennes—a piece of extravagance on which Hester would have frowned had she known it; and as she had fastened her simple brooch, and brushed out more carefully the dark brown hair, which would persist in waving so obstinately over her eyes, she saw such a bright little face in the glass as half reconciled her to her

own want of beauty; and now, what was the good of it, if Hester would persist in spoiling her day.

It was so unjust, too; for she had offered yesterday afternoon to help with those curtains, but Hester was cross with her about some trifle, and had refused to have them down, though it was a wet day, and both she and Connie wanted employment; and now she chose to be contradictory, and sit down to them on a hot afternoon, and when she had a headache too, and had called her inconsiderate because she would stay at home for a whim.

"It is so mean and so unjust," cried Barbara; "I hate meanness and injustice of all things;" and Barbara stood still in the dusty road, and stamped with her little foot till Ben, alarmed at his mistress's vehemence, and thinking it addressed to him, rolled over on his huge back, making unwieldy advances with his outstretched paws, and slobbering with his red tongue in the dust, till Barbara, laughing, though with the tears in her eyes, told him to get up, for he was a foolish fellow; and then tucked up her grey dress in dismay, as he made loving feints and dodges at her—leaping up to her shoulders in his joy at his restoration to favour. Refreshed by these flattering attentions on the part of her four-legged friend, Barbara's dragging and dignified step degenerated again into her usual hoppity one, and by the time she had un-

latched the little green gate, the very black cloud lifted itself—frowns and all—off her crumpled-up forehead, and she was wandering among the trim flower-beds, smelling at Norman's roses, and whistling back a challenge to the cuckoo in high good humour indeed.

Mrs. Strath lived in one of those old-fashioned cottages that one sees in most country villages—a long white house with narrow windows, and a green verandah running all round, with glass doors back and front, opening on to a little sloping lawn full of crescent and star-shaped beds—with here and there a curiously-cut box, and a low privet hedge dividing it from the road in front, and a market-garden at the back.

That Barbara was an old and privileged guest might be seen by the way she avoided the more public mode of entrance, and skirting the green verandah on one side, suddenly popped her head in an open window.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Strath!"

"Why, Barbara, do you know you are half-an-hour late; here I have been sitting in state for I don't know how long, watching the shadows purpling the grass, and wondering what had become of you?"

"Can't help it, ma'am—Hester made a fuss and kept me. She wanted me to stay at home and do

some work, I believe, while Connie lies on the sofa and reads "David Copperfield"—that child is fearfully spoilt, to be sure—and then, because I pleaded my engagement to you, she was that disagreeable that I was obliged to stamp out my feelings in the dusty road, much to Ben's dismay—there!"—and Barbara made one of her puckered-up faces, which were always so irresistibly ludicrous.

"Well, well," said Mrs. Strath, trying hard to preserve her gravity, but failing utterly—"we must make up for lost time, that's all; run up to the blue room and take off your hat, for if you stay there any longer you'll wear your new gloves all into holes, pulling at them so viciously—the blue room remember, Barbara; and you'll find a little breast-knot I've tied up for you on the toilette table."

Barbara obeyed gleefully, and soon came dancing down again, looking fresher than ever with the damask roses fastened nattily into her grey dress.

"What a dear room, and how nice you look, Mrs. Strath, and how happy I am to be here," and Barbara disposed herself on a low stool at Mrs. Strath's feet, and nodded round well satisfied.

It was a cosy, home-like room to be sure, always cool and shaded even on the hottest summer's day; nothing precise or stiff about it; tables well littered with work and books, looking wonderfully inviting.

with their reading-lamps and flower-baskets: with little old-fashioned couches and easy-chairs placed temptingly near them, and mingled with other flowering scents, the sweet dry odour of rose-pourri, which filled the great blue dragon china jars on either side of the fireplace. Barbara always thought of Hester's miscalled improvements, as she looked round Mrs. Strath's parlour. There was nothing modern here; no nick-nacks, or articles of bijouterie; but, instead, wonderful little oil paintings grimed with age in ruinous black frames; or mirrors that distorted you oddly when you looked in them; china cups without handles, saucers with great ugly scars in them, two or three labelled minerals, and a marvellously worked sampler set as a fire-screen; and yet Barbara loved every one of them, and would finger and touch them gently, as one would the wrinkles in an old friend's face.

And then the soft motherly presence that filled the whole; the little trim figure, the worn, delicate face, in its widow's cap, the quiet, refined voice; no wonder Barbara nodded round well satisfied, and felt herself in a haven of content.

"Mrs. Strath, it is good to be here."

"My dear, you always say so, and it is pleasant hearing; and yet it is strange that you should care to come and sit with an old woman like me."

"An old woman," interrupted Barbara, indig-

nantly, and she leaned her cheek on the soft white hand. "Why will you talk so?"

"Nay, it is truth, and a happy truth, too. Ask Norman if I am not proud of my age; if I do not string up my years in such a glad hurry, that I often add to them rather than diminish. What are you sighing for, Barbara?"

"Because I believe I understand it. Because I think I would change places—ah, how gladly—to have a real lived-out life lying behind me like you have. Sometimes, I think I should like to die young, Mrs. Strath. What will the years bring to me?"

"A well-earned happiness, I trust. Ah, Barbara, you are a young thing to talk so. What have you done that you should enter into your rest, before me, who have borne the burden and heat of the day?"

Barbara hung her head a little sadly. "I never thought of it in that light—as a reward I mean—I only meant that I am so tired of this monotony and home-worry, sometimes I get so chafed and mad, that I feel I would give up a dozen years of my existence, only to live the remainder of my youth as other people live theirs."

"You are an enigma, I do not understand you. You have your troubles, of course; but what things do you lack that you have not in common with other

young people? Health, strength, a tolerable disposition, a fair share of abilities, and a mind rather above the usual average of girls. Are not these rich materials to work upon?"

"Ah, yes, materials; but what good are they? I have health and strength, of course, and I hope I am grateful for them. My disposition is not tolerable, thank you; my abilities only make me crave the more eagerly for the opportunity of acquiring knowledge, and where am I to acquire it in this more dead-than-alive place, this drawling mill-stream they call Sunningford, where there is not a person worth knowing."

"There is Norman," began Mrs. Strath, in maternal pride, but Barbara interrupted her.

"Yes, we have Norman Strath, I grant, our one learned man among us. But what of that?"

"What of that? Why I should think—" returned her friend, half-affronted, but Barbara again stopped her.

"I know what you are going to say. You should think I ought to find some pleasure and profit in his conversation; but I don't, for I know he hates me; at least, if he does not, he snubs, and lectures, and scolds me, as if I were a child; laughs at my opinions, and ridicules my theories. He behaves quite differently to me to what he does to Hester. Mrs. Strath, you know I speak the truth."

"I know nothing of the kind. That is one of your absurd fancies, Barbara. Norman is a kind friend to you, and yours. Granted, that he laughs at you a little, and casts ridicule on what he calls your strong-minded arguments. Can't you bear a little satire from a clever man like Norman, when you bear it so good-naturedly from me?"

"No, I can't," persisted Barbara, with a very hot face. "It's so different; you love me, and are my friend, and all your hard sayings are to do me good. But, Norman——"

"Wants to do you good, too."

"No, he does not; and if he did, it is no business of his, and so I often tell him. He does it to aggravate me, and put me in a passion; and then he laughs, and wishes I had Hester's calm temperament. The worst of it is," went on Barbara, in an aggrieved tone, which highly amused her friend, "The worst of it is, that with all his disagreeable habits, one can't positively hate Norman, and if one did, one would like to be a little appreciated even by one's enemy."

Mrs. Strath's low laugh was pleasant to hear.

"Then it all resolves itself into this, that Barbara Heathcote hates to be laughed at, lectured, or treated like a child. I must give Norman a hint or we shall have a grand flare-up one of these days."

"If you do, I will never speak to you again. No, it resolves itself into this, that Barbara Heathcote is a miserably misplaced woman."

"My dear!"

"I have said it. I am suffocated and stifled up in this corner. I want breathing room. I want to live, Mrs. Strath, not to exist merely, like a chrysalis. I have wings; I can feel them. I must fly away."

"Whither, poor child?"

"Whither? Ah, that is the question. Perhaps life will come to me here. Ah, if it only would!"

"How old are you, Barbara?"

"Two-and-twenty next August. I am Daddie's autumn rose, you know—a little brown, crumpled up rose, parched and shrivelled by sun and wind, and set with little wilful thorns. I prick everyone who touches me, Mrs. Strath."

"Yourself most of all. Ah, Barbara! I am sorry for you, sorry for your restlessness and discontent; but I cannot blame you; I was just the same at your age."

"You!" cried Barbara, looking wonderingly up into the placid face, rather thin and pinched now, it is true, but still fair and sweet for all that. "You, who are of all people so quiet and calm!"

"But I was not always so," returned the widow, "I have groped my way to calmness through the

long darkness of pain. Barbara, I don't care much to touch on bygone days even to my own son; but you shall have a glimpse of my life—a faint, passing glimpse of it, if you like."

Barbara's eyes sparkled; her whole face looked a mute entreaty.

"When I was your age, and long, long before, I challenged my fate in much the same words as you did just now. My life was too quiet, too monotonous, full of petty every-day worries. Ah, it was dull, Barbara; yours cannot hold a comparison to it. My parents were just dead; my only brother, and almost my only relative, had joined his father's regiment in Canada; and I was left in the charge of an old maiden aunt living in an uninteresting suburb of London. She did not understand young people. There was nothing in common between us. Her whole nature was uncongenial; her pursuits odious to me. She wearied me with her endless lists of charitable societies—soup-giving, flannel-distributing, soul-converting. It seemed to me that the poorest of her pensioners had a greater claim on her time and patience than I, her dead sister's child. But if she wearied me, I must confess I disappointed her. I would have nothing to do with her favourite ministers, clothing clubs, and maternity meetings. I withheld my money, or gave it stingily; and shut myself up in my own

apartments, fretting myself, and beating against the bars of my cage like a prisoned bird. Nay, I was worse than you, Barbara, for I pined, and sickened, and moped till I fell ill and was like to die; and when my life was given back to me I wept and raged against the gift. I grew quite sullen in my convalescence; but a friend of my aunt's, who had daughters of her own, and saw how I pined in this uncongenial atmosphere, had compassion on me, and took the poor motherless girl to her own home, and nursed the old roses back into my cheeks, and the light and hope into my heart. Ah, then it came—the happiness I had asked and prayed for—when my cousin Marmaduke Strath returned from his travels—came down to Nettlewood—saw, loved, and made me his wife."

Barbara drew a long breath. Mrs. Strath looked at her and went on—

"Then indeed everything was changed. The sunshine! the brilliancy almost blinded me. I lived now, for I loved—I loved. Ah, Barbara! beware of a jealous love. I loved to idolatry. Marmaduke was everything; nay more than I desired, and we began our married life with a splendor that dawns but for few. We had each a fortune, but mine, in that dreary Clapham life, had never brought me any pleasure; now I revelled in it. We had a superb residence, rich furniture,

glorious equipages, and my husband, who I could say with truth was one of the most attractive men you could see anywhere, soon drew round him a brilliant circle of rank, intellect, and fashion. We were both young, and fond of pleasure. He encouraged me in my love of display. 'His beautiful Lettice should shine with the grandest,' he said. Our days passed in a giddy round of pleasure, of which it sickens me now to think. There was a brief pause, it is true, when my boy was born; the novelty of my treasure so fascinated me that I would willingly have resigned my position in the gay world a little while to stay at home and watch my baby's smiles, but Marmaduke would not have it so, and drew me on. I had my duties to fulfil to him and to my friends, he declared. The child should have the best of nurses; everything that money could buy — everything, alas! but his mother's care. He would not have me moping in the nursery all day, and losing my fine color. I was his wife; he could not do without me. Ah, Barbara! I loved my baby, but I idolised my husband. The child grew up, and ran, and prattled, and caressed everyone but his mother, and she was a stranger to him. True, he saw a gaily-dressed lady enter his little nursery twice a day, who kissed him and showed him shining trinkets, but he soon wearied of them, and would run

away to his nurse to be fondled on her lap—the nurse who had nourished him from her own breast. Barbara, believe me, I was faulty, unnatural if you like—weak and wicked too, but my punishment was very sore; part of it was that, for many, many years, even after I was widowed, my boy did not care for his mother—did not love me, and would seek sympathy from the merest stranger rather than from me."

Barbara stroked her hand in mute sympathy.

"When my little girl was born—my golden-haired Lily, I made another faint resistance to Marmaduke's will, but in vain. I was too much admired, too flattered to be left at home. If I staid he would stay too; so I went. The old nurse who had taken charge of my boy had left to be married for the second time, and the little lad himself was thriving in a farm-house under her care. The servant whom the housekeeper had engaged for Lily turned out a careless slattern of a woman. She was not unkind to the little creature; nay, I believe she loved her in her own rough way, but she was fond of gossiping in the servants' hall when the housekeeper was out, leaving the infant alone.

"Ah, Barbara, don't ask me any questions; in pity let me pass on. One night, when her heartless mother was dancing at the ambassador's ball, the

little creature lay writhing in all the horrors of convulsions in her lonely nursery at the top of the great house."

"Mrs. Strath!" cried Barbara, in a tone of horror.

"Ah, it sounds too dreadful to be true, does it not? while that wicked nurse—I must call her so, though I was ten times more wicked than she—was carousing down among the other servants for hours, my baby struggled with death throes. It was asleep, smiling to itself like an angel when the girl went down. Something must have terrified it. No one knows, save God, who will demand that sweet innocent life at its mother's hand. But when relief came it was too late. When I ran upstairs, wondering at the unusual noise, and humming a gay waltz air all the while, I came suddenly upon it; the stiffened limbs of my dead infant, with the death agony still upon her face, and the wretched girl writhing in hysterics beside her. My heart became like a stone. Oh, Lily, Lily! my golden-haired darling! your mother bears that deadly wound in her heart still."

"Dear Mrs. Strath, I did not guess this. How could I? Do not go on, you distress me."

"Child, this was but a phase of your so-called life, and brilliant life too. Did I not say my punishment was sore. Miserable mother that I was. I

drank the dregs of a life-long remorse. Marmaduke could not comfort me, it was beyond his power. Only my God could do that in his own good time; and I had not felt my way to him yet. I shut myself up, avoided society, never even noticed how my husband bore my absence, never wondered at his new taciturnity and unusual fits of depression, or if I did, only attributed it to the loss of our child, he who seldom gave a thought to it. It came out soon; and I remember how stolidly and stupidly I listened; how I angered him by my very apathy. We were beggared, he told me. What did that matter? What did anything matter now? We had thrown away two fortunes in our senseless extravagance. We had been living beyond our means. Did I know he had speculated and lost? Yes, I heard all. I witnessed his despair, his mad anger, his, my Marmaduke's, and never winced. Did I not say my heart was turned to stone? But I woke soon. The very greatness of our misfortune, which stunned and unnerved him, roused me to something like my former self. I settled all business details, made arrangements with creditors for selling off house and furniture, for he left everything to me; and then, by parting with my own jewels, scraped together enough to live for some time till Marmaduke could find employment; and then, fetching our boy from his farmhouse, we settled down in

a quiet continental town to begin life afresh together. It might have been well with us, Barbara, for we had a tolerable sum of money, if it had not been for Marmaduke's weakness. He was too proud to seek for employment, too proud to work. He just idled and fretted his days away, and at night when I was asleep and dreaming of my Lily, he would go out and gamble away our poor little stock of money, now winning, now losing, deaf to my prayers, my remonstrances, my anger—he who had always regarded my least word. The craving fever for gold was on him, every farthing went. He was making our fortunes, he said, paying back to my boy and me all we had lost. I used to put my arms round his neck sometimes, and pray him by our love to listen to me, and he would not. He would push me off, and go out with that greedy look in his eyes to lose again and again, and all the time it was killing him, the fever of winning, the despair of losing, the fierce hunger, the horrible gnawing thirst, the deadly greed, ah, Marmaduke! He could not eat, he could not sleep; and then there came a day when the fever left him, and he looked out upon the sunshine with sane bright eyes, and a broken heart, and called me to him, and laid his poor dying head on my bosom and prayed God and his Lettice to forgive him, for he had ruined us. Ah, husband of my love, what need of forgiveness between thee and me?

"When that happened we were starving. I had hidden it from him as best I could, but often and often he had left us with only bread in the house; and many a four-and-twenty hours my boy and I have lived on a bare crust. Barbara, I never recal those days, I never think of them; only sometimes they return to me in my dreams. Child, not even to you will I speak of the days that followed my husband's death,—days of desolation and anguish, starvation and terror. But God had not forgotten me, and in my worst strait help came to the widow and the fatherless; for then my great-aunt, whose relationship I had almost forgotten—whose very name was strange to me, died, bequeathing her little all to me: it was not much, but it seemed a fortune; I had learned prudence in the school of adversity, and with care I contrived to live on a small annuity, and give my son a good education. We returned to England at once, and took up our residence in a town in the very house where my aunt had lived; and those old pictures and curiosities you have so often admired belonged to her, and came to me with her other furniture. It was long before I could forget the past, and become reconciled to my present life; but I set myself to win my boy's confidence and love, and with that happiness returned. My boy has been the consolation of my life; and his quiet, steady character, so

different to his poor father's versatile talents, ensure his eventual success. There is only one thing in which he has ever pained me all these years,—his taking those shares in the Spanish mines contrary to my wishes. I detest speculation, and have inoculated Hester with my fears. Yes, Norman has a great nature, and is a deep and earnest thinker. I do not fear for his future. We live together, as you see; but one day I hope he will take a wife to himself. Sometimes I fancy, in spite of his apparent content, that the medical profession is not his forte, and that he feels his sphere of usefulness too contracted; but he never says so: my boy is no grumbler in the ranks of duty. Nay, Barbara, do not look so downcast. My sad little story has been a sore punishment for your inconsiderat words."

"I had no idea you had suffered so," said Barbara, with a little sob; "but all lives are not as sad as yours. I cannot take back my words: but you had some happy times, surely?"

"Some," answered Mrs. Strath, and her eyes lighted brilliantly: she was forgetting to whom she was speaking. "Some! When I think of Marmaduke's love, and those first five or six years of married life, I am sometimes tempted to forget the sorrowful end. I only think of what he was to me before Lily died."

"I thought so," answered Barbara, triumphantly. "A love like that swallows up pain. Mrs. Strath, I would give much to know I had those five or six years of happiness coming to me."

"Child, child, you are incorrigible: you do not know what you are talking about. But here comes Jeannie with the tea, and I must go and help her set the table."

CHAPTER VII.

NORMAN.

"We read or talked, or quarreled, as it chanced,
We were not lovers, nor even friends well matched;
Say rather, scholars upon different tracks,
And thinkers disagreed, he, overfull
Of what is, and I, haply, overbold
For what might be."

Mrs. Browning's Aurora Leigh.

If there was one thing Barbara liked it was Mrs. Strath's tea-table. She could not tell why, but it always seemed better than anyone else's. Hester never could be made to understand the difference, and piqued herself not a little on her own table arrangements; but Barbara persisted in her opinion for all that, and always thought taking tea at Oakleigh Cottage was the finest treat in the world.

The tea seemed to have a different and more aromatic flavour drank out of those purple china cups with their egg-shell thinness. The very sugar was a puzzling experiment, taken up in those massive silver sugar-tongs, which always dropped every other piece, much to the visitor's dismay; and the

silver cream ewer, which always held the richest and yellowest cream—none of your pretence of skimmed milk—was such an upright, knowing little affair, with a crooked twisted little nose, which Barbara always called Paul Pry, much to Norman's endless mystification, and her friend's amusement. And then there never was such thin bread-and-butter anywhere else, or such curious out-of-the-way preserves. Barbara had never heard of preserved lettuce stalks, and green tomatoes, till she came to tea at Oakleigh Cottage; but there they always were in glass saucers, reposing upon silver tripods, in company with a certain dark rich seed-cake known as Dundee, and compounded for Mrs. Strath's special favourites.

And yet Hester, in her housewifely pride, could never see anything to admire in Mrs. Strath's tea-table, and found fault with the great crusty brown loaf that was always placed at Norman's corner, in case he should come in hungry from his long country ride. But then, Hester was always sparing of her admiration of anything at Oakleigh Cottage, though why was beyond Barbara's knowledge and her own too.

"Ah, there's Norman!" exclaimed his mother in a pleased voice, as a firm heavy tread sounded in the passage. "Now I've poured out the tea, Barbara, come and take your old seat, and leave Norman

his. There you are, my dear, punctual to a minute," she added, as the door opened and her son entered. "You see we've company to-night."

"I certainly did not expect to see Barbara," he said in a surprised tone, but giving her his hand cordially enough. "I saw Hester just now, but she never said a word about your being here."

"I daresay not," returned Barbara shortly, and then they all sat down. It was one of Barbara's fancies that the parlour at Oakleigh never looked half so cosy and homelike when Norman was in it, and she reverted to this opinion of hers with an odd persistency, as she looked across the table at him now. He was such a large man,—not clumsy, certainly, for his size, which exceeded the ordinary height,—Norman's dignity preserved him from awkwardness, but the little room seemed always smaller when he was in it. And then he was so ugly too. No one, not even his mother, could say much for his looks, though she had always a little word of praise for his mouth, which she declared was perfect. But many who were admirers of thews and sinews, called Norman Strath a fine man. He had a strong, well-knit form, a splendid width of chest, and a well-poised head; but he was a plain man for all that. He had a dark, sallow complexion, and a very low, though not narrow forehead, which was made lower still by one smooth

wave of hair, which would persist in lying flatly across it; and then his eyes, though they were keen and bright enough, were set deeply under overhanging brows, and his great square chin was half hidden with a reddish stubbly beard. Can you see him, reader? Do you understand the manner of man he is? I protest I could not, if I were not partially, if not wholly, drawing from the life. And I can tell you for your consolation, that though the face is formed on rather an unprepossessing type, it is one you get used to in time. His mother loved it; Barbara in time grew reconciled to it, when their little feuds healed, and they began to understand each other; while Hester always described him as an uncommon looking man, and wished with a sigh that Geoffry's smooth ruddy face had half Norman's character.

"I wonder Hester did not mention it," continued Norman, helping himself liberally from the brown loaf, and returning to the subject, very stupidly as Barbara thought. "I was summoned in the middle of the afternoon to prescribe for her. It was only a little headache and faintness, but Connie was frightened. The heat of the weather, I suppose, and she has been overdoing it again. I gave her a good lecture; it was nothing at all particular, so Barbara need not be alarmed."

"I am not at all alarmed, thank you," returned

Barbara coldly, and in a tone that made Norman raise his eyebrows. "The weather always tries Hester, and she was well enough when I came out."

"She must have been doing too much then, as Norman said," remarked Mrs. Strath. "You were quite right to scold her, my dear. Somehow I fancy Hester has not been quite herself lately; she looks delicate and careworn. I must speak to her father about her."

Norman tilted his spoon on the edge of his tea-cup, and listened with closed lips. Then he looked across at Barbara, who was saying to herself with a shrug, "They are throwing away their sympathy did they only know it. Hester does not deserve any pity. It is all that Geoffry Humden who is making her ill. She despises him, and yet is going to marry him." And then she sat with closed lips too.

"My remark is treated with silence. I admire your professional reserve, Norman, but Barbara must know what ails her sister, and that something does, I am well convinced."

"Barbara is a follower of the great Machiavelli mother, who holds that the true use of words is to disguise thought. You will have a sample thereof in her next speech." Said Barbara, "As usual you mean exactly the opposite of what you say, but I shall disappoint you and hold my tongue. I get

tired of plain speaking, it makes so much mischief. If Hester is ill, I do not know it; and if I did, I should not sympathise with her, for the remedy is in her own hands."

Norman's spoon fell down with a crash.

"A truly Barbara-like speech; clear, concise, and just to the point, and so exquisitely womanly. Truly we are all enacting 'Much Ado about Nothing.' Give me another cup of tea, mother, and cream it well."

"But I hope now you have discovered Hester's ailments, that you will prescribe something beneficial for her—a tonic, to brace her up, you know," continued Barbara with a modest primness. Of all things she knew how Norman hated anything professional brought on the tapis, "talking shop," as he called it. "You spoke of headache and faintness just now; were those her only symptoms?"

Norman eyed her keenly, and, if we must say the truth, a little savagely; and then he relaxed into a broad smile.

"Revenge is sweet, Barbara. I started an unlucky topic, Barbara, and you another. Come, we've shut up shop for to-night. And now, if you will tell me who picked my favourite damask roses, I will give you a bit of news worth hearing in this dead-alive village."

The pleasant, hearty voice, very rarely addressed

to her, restored Barbara's equanimity; and a very bright dimpling smile answered him.

"Mrs. Strath gathered the roses for me; and very pretty they look on my grey dress. You see I am obliged to say that, because you never pay compliments. And now for the news."

"Softly, softly; what a hurry you're in. You need not look at my mother, Barbara: she is in the secret as well as I; and by this time all Sunningford knows it."

"Do you mean," asked his mother, eagerly, and her eyes sparkled, "that you and Dr. Heathcote——"

"Ah! I forgot all about that; that will keep till afterwards. You know St. Ronans, Barbara?"

"St. Ronans! and the dear old firwoods where we had our pic-nic last week, and the forget-me-not meadows, as we call them, down by the Brackley stream,—know St. Ronan's! of course I do."

"Then you will be glad to hear that it has found a purchaser, and the family are coming to take possession of it in a few days."

"Glad! well I suppose I am," returned Barbara, doubtfully. "If they are pleasant people they will be an addition to our village society; but Ben and I will not like to be turned out of our dear old pinewoods for all the new people in the world."

"Ben and you need not be afraid: there will always be a public right-of-way through the fir plantations."

"Oh, then, in that case, I shall be very glad to see St. Ronans occupied. It was a shame such a beautiful old place should go begging for a tenant. But where in the world did you pick up this grand piece of news, Norman? I thought you never gossiped with your patients."

"No more I do," replied Norman, in a piqued tone. "You are out there, Barbara. As it happens, my mother had it from head-quarters,—from Lady Strath herself."

"Your mother — Lady Strath — are they relations of yours, then?" cried downright Barbara. "And why have you never told me all these hours, Mrs. Strath, when you and I were talking together?"

Mrs. Strath smiled down into the eager face. "I think you and I had plenty to do with our time, Barbara; and the grand piece of news as you call it, went entirely out of my head. Norman and I take it more quietly than you do. Yes; I had a letter from Lady Strath this morning detailing her plans, and giving me a commission or two."

"But who is she? and why have you never mentioned her name before this? and why has she bought St. Ronans?"

"Gently, gently, my dear; you ask too many questions in a breath. Lady Strath is my sister-in-law. You remember my only brother, whom I told you had gone to join his father's regiment in Canada?"

"Yes, I remember. You said he was almost the only relative you had."

"The only near relative. Well; he had a very brilliant and successful life out there; was knighted for his services; and, what's more, materially added to his fortune. He married a wealthy widow, so that he was richly endowed with all this world's goods."

"Why then did he not relieve your necessities?" began Barbara, wonderingly, and then stopped, coloring high at Mrs. Strath's warning hand.

"I have been telling Barbara a little of my past history," continued Mrs. Strath, answering Norman's astonished look. "She is a safe confidant, though a young one. Your question is a very natural one, my love, though you had better not have asked it at present. My brother died long before the time I needed friends, and my sister-in-law had left Canada, and I had no means of ascertaining her whereabouts, even if I had wished for her assistance, which I did not. She was a perfect stranger to me, remember; and we never met till,

thanks to my Aunt Bridget's bounty, we were comfortably settled in England."

"You are treating Barbara to a very prolix explanation, mother; borrowing a leaf out of Lady Strath's book, I think. I hate the very mention of those days, and I wish she had fixed her residence a hundred miles from here."

Mrs. Strath saw Barbara's perplexity, and answered it. "Lady Strath is no favorite of my son's, nor, to tell the truth, of mine either. He had the misfortune to offend her as a boy, and they have never understood each other since. There is nothing to be surprised at in that," she continued, hastily, seeing how Barbara's round eyes provoked Norman. "Kindred blood does not always mean kindred minds."

"I should think Barbara would agree with you there," observed Norman, meaningly; "though she does seem so astonished that you don't get on flourishingly with your own sister-in-law."

"We are perfectly friendly when we meet," returned Mrs. Strath, evidently annoyed at her son's observation. "No one can ever accuse me of quarreling, Norman; nor, as far as that goes, you either. Indeed it is rather difficult for anyone to quarrel with Lady Strath: she is such a plausible, well-spoken woman."

"You are right there, mother."

"And then there are the children. One would keep peace at any hazard for their sake. I should not like my brother's children to turn against me."

"How many are there?" asked Barbara, eagerly. She could not help keeping up this interesting conversation, though she saw that somehow it vexed Norman.

"Only two—a boy and a girl: Nigel and Nest. Are not those curious names? And very delicate creatures they are. We saw a great deal of them for a year or two, and then they went abroad, chiefly for Nigel's health, I believe."

"Are you so credulous as to believe that, mother?" interrupted Norman, scornfully. "I think, from what we hear of Lady Strath's gay winters at Vienna and Rome, that she found England rather too dull for her pleasure-loving temperament."

"I don't know why we are always ready to attribute unworthy motives to any on whose actions we look coldly. It is an especial failing of yours, Norman. I believe Lady Strath to be a devoted mother, to Nigel at least. I know the doctors recommended another climate for him. She says in her letter to me that it has done wonders for him. He has quite thrown away his crutches, and only halts so slightly that no one would notice it."

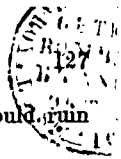
"What is the matter with him?" asked Barbara,

curiously, and unmindful of the cloud on Norman's brow.

"He had an accident in his boyhood," replied Mrs. Strath, speaking very low and hurriedly, "and it resulted in sad mischief, for disease settled in the hip, and for some years he was quite lame. The strangest part is, that his sister is also very sickly. She was a fine, healthy infant enough; but all at once, from no attributable cause that her mother could find out,—though I always say it must have been some carelessness on the part of her nurse—one never can tell how these things happen,—the little creature began to dwindle and pine; and though she was straight enough when she was born, a slight deformity betrayed itself, to the poor mother's grief."

"Well," said Barbara, breathlessly.

"It was nothing very perceptible, and, from what I can hear, it has not increased. She is still very small in stature, Lady Strath writes, though a woman in years, and with one shoulder rather higher than the other; but her health has greatly improved, and by all accounts she is the same dear, loveable little creature she always promised to be. When she was a child she was rather neglected—Norman thought unkindly so—by her mother, who was wholly wrapped up in Nigel. If ever woman made an idol of her child, Lady Strath did of that



boy. I was afraid her over fondness would ruin him. Boy as he was, he ruled the house."

"What sort of a looking person is Lady Strath herself?" asked Barbara.

"Rather a handsome, stately-looking woman. Norman does not admire her, but that is his prejudice. She was a great beauty, I have heard, when my poor brother married her. But now, Barbara, I think I have satisfied your curiosity ten times over; and, if you please, we will leave the subject, or Norman will be cutting my table-cloth to pieces with the bread-knife."

"I beg your pardon, I am sure," replied Norman, rousing himself from the brown abstraction into which he had fallen, and wrinkling his forehead hideously in the attempt to rid it of its frown. "Well, I foolishly started the subject, and I have been obliged to pay a nice penalty this last half-hour, and now, if you will forgive my introducing a small personal matter into the present company, before we leave the table, I will just tell you, mother, what has been settled to-day. Dr. Heathcote has taken me into partnership."

"Already? without waiting for the year? Oh, Norman, I am so glad!" and Mrs. Strath laid her hand fondly on her son's—an unusual mark of affection, for those two were as undemonstrative in their daily life as ever the Heathcotes were, and,

but for the night and morning kiss, Mrs. Strath's caresses were rare, and Norman's rarer still. He replied to it now with the full bright smile which came so seldom, and always lighted up the rugged, rather severe face, like sunshine on granite; but his tone betrayed real rather than assumed indifference.

"It was time I made my position, and Dr. Heathcote saw that, and my services were too valuable to be lost. Oh! it is well enough; but it will be some time yet before I can give you a home more worthy of you, *madre mia*, unless, indeed, those Spanish mines make our fortune."

"Oh, Norman, Oakleigh Cottage is good enough for me. I shall never ask for a better, till I go to my long rest. It is you who must make another and a grander home for yourself, my son, and one to which you will like to bring your wife."

What an odd sensation crossed Barbara at that moment! "Norman's wife!" it sounded strange, and yet once, and not very long ago, she had thought it would be Hester, and she fancied Mrs. Strath thought so too. Was she disappointed? was he? Barbara wondered; but no, it could never have been! Hester had only a sort of sisterly affection for him, and had said over and over again that nothing would ever induce her to be his wife. "And why not?" Barbara still soliloquized, "be-

cause he was ugly? but still a hundred times, nay, a thousand times, preferable to that soft Geoffrey Hunsden; only he was poor, and Geoffrey was rich, was that it?"

Norman gave a conscious little laugh, and colored all over his dark face. Barbara did not know why; but that struck her as being very funny too; perhaps he liked Hester after all!

"We will wait till my wife comes before we talk about a home for her; but mothers always will go on like that. Do I look like a marrying man, Barbara?" and he opened his keen eyes full on her, and threw back his head with a proud gesture, opening and shutting his hands nervously the while.

"I don't know," answered Barbara, with a new timidity. She was rather afraid of Norman when he looked at her like that. He seemed to compel her to answer, whether she would or not. Then, gathering fresh courage, but feeling a little queer notwithstanding, "I cannot think who she will be."

"I dare say not," returned Norman, with a strange laugh. "Time will show, time will show, Barbara." He seemed about to say something more, but checked himself, biting his lips hard.

"I wonder Hester did not have us all to dine on such a grand occasion as your partnership," said Mrs. Strath. "I shall tell her she is failing in

befitting reverence. How pleased the dear doctor must have looked! Did he rub his hands a good deal, Norman? Ah! what a good friend he has been to us, my son!"

"Yes; I think we shall get on well together. The doctor has his hobbies, of course. Not every young man would put up with his old-fashioned theories now-a-days."

"Old-fashioned theories!" burst out Barbara. She was up on her stilts directly. "I don't suppose there is such a clever doctor as Daddie in the whole country. I know, that great London physician, Sir Septimus Barrington, said he never met with a more sensible medical practitioner."

"Sir Septimus Barrington is an old woman, and a bit of a humbug in the bargain. They agreed, of course, because they both move in the same old-fashioned groove. We young doctors would find fault now with Sir Septimus's treatment. Look at Dr. Heathcote now!"

"Well, what about my father, Norman? I thought we had shut up shop for the night." But Norman, absorbed in his subject, scarcely heeded her.

"Look at his horror of stimulants. He is changing his mind about that though now, when he saw how I brought little Dora Evans through the diphtheria, and yet the state of mind he was in

because I would give her brandy and port-wine! It was a new disease then, you know, and he thought I was killing her, bringing on fever, &c.; and then he is too fond of the blister. Now Sir Septimus Barrington and he——"

"Thank you," said Barbara, rising in some displeasure, "I don't care to hear my father's professional skill impugned, even by his own partner. Mrs. Strath, it is very late, moonlight, you see; I think it is almost time for me to go home."

"Not for another half-hour or so," interposed Norman. "Finish your chat with my mother; I have a little writing to do in the study, and then I will just run up the road with you."

"There is not the slightest occasion," began Barbara, stiffly; but her answer was lost on Norman, for he had left the room.

"Now you must stay, Barbara, or you will offend him; he never likes his escort refused. Here, come and sit in this cosy chair, beside me. You are tired, child. There, see how pretty our little garden looks in the moonlight!"

Barbara rested her head wearily against her friend's shoulder, and looked wistfully out at the white paths and the dark-cut shadows of the tree-tops, and then up at the purple-blue sky, where two or three flickering stars glimmered and shone, while all sorts of sweet scents seemed wandering

round her in the darkness, and something pleasant and restful stirred at her heart.

"Sleepy, Barbara?"

"No, only thinking—dreaming rather—I thought I saw my dead mother's eyes shining on me through that intense blue—wonderful starlike eyes full of Paradisal rest—and when you hold me like this it always lulls me into silence; I seem to feel her arms round me warm and tight like yours."

"Poor child!"

"I have an odd motherless feeling sometimes, Mrs. Strath. She was not unlike you—does that make me love you so?"

"Do you love me, little Barbara?"

"Aye, dearly, dearly. I prop up myself against your restful age; I want no young friend—no girl friends, I mean, of my own age when I have you. You see I tell you all my thoughts."

"Heaven bless you, dear."

"Why was Norman so bitter when we talked just now, Mrs. Strath? Why did he look so grave and angry when you mentioned his aunt?"

"What, curious again, and back on the old subject? Well, I suppose I must satisfy you, but you must never tell anyone—not even Norman—that you know."

"Of course not," exclaimed Barbara indignantly; "I can keep a secret better than most people."

"It is not much of a secret, my dear, only being rather painful, Norman does not like to have it known. When Norman and Nigel were boys, they were a great deal together. Nigel was devoted to his cousin, and Norman was more with him than at home. I am sorry to say my boy had, or rather I should say has, a passionate temper, and Nigel was dreadfully spoiled, capricious, and uncertain, even to those he loved; it was very trying to Norman's high-spirited nature and the lads had many disputes together, each wanting their own way, and neither willing to yield; and it did not much mend matters that Lady Strath always came to her son's rescue—taking his part, justly or unjustly, as the case might be.

"They were having a terrible quarrel one day, and their high words reaching Lady Strath's ears; she ran as usual to separate them, and overwhelm her own boy with entreaties and caresses; and Norman would not stand it. Nigel was in the wrong—decidedly in the wrong, and would not give up what he had in his hand; some money I think it was. He continued to refuse, encouraged by his mother's presence; and Norman, advancing to wrest it out of his hand, received a violent box on the ears from Lady Strath. It was so severe a blow that he reeled, and was almost stunned; he quite staggered back, and then, his furious temper mad-

dened by injustice, he wrenched the gold out of Nigel's hand, driving him before him, and dealing with him so roughly, that in the scuffle—they were on the nursery landing—he pushed him, as Lady Strath declares—Norman says he fell—from the top of the stairs to the bottom, and he fell on his hip.

"He was a delicate boy, and sore mischief resulted from that fall. Lady Strath, who had never in her heart liked Norman, was fearfully incensed against him, and worked herself up to such a pitch of resentment that she would not see or speak to him for a twelvemonth; and though Nigel was eager to be reconciled to his old playmate, and took most of the blame of the quarrel on himself, she would not suffer the lads to meet till just before they left England. There now, Barbara, you have the pith of the whole matter; run and put on your hat, for I hear Norman moving in his study."

"But I thought you said Lady Strath and you never quarrelled," persisted Barbara, in her obstinate way.

"No more we do; neither did we at the time. His aunt's resentment (he never gave her the title of Aunt, Barbara) seemed wholly directed against Norman, and we always maintained an outward friendliness towards each other, but it was not sincere—I sided with my boy, and resented her harsh

treatment of him in my heart, though, for the children's sake—my poor Hugh's children—I tried hard to keep the peace; but there, you chatterbox, I will not say another word about it: Norman will be dreadfully annoyed if he knows you have wheedled it out of me."

CHAPTER VIII.

BAB FINDS A VISITOR AT DORT'S MILL.

"Would I were secretary to your thoughts."
Edward Philips, nephew of Milton.

"BARBARA, are you very busy this evening?"

"No, not very. Wait till I have finished this piece of dark shading, and then I will attend to you." And Bab shook the brown tangle off her eyes, not unlike the way in which a terrier does, and went on with her drawing.

Hester was lying on the couch in the Harlequin-room, looking worn and delicate indeed. The faintness and headache which Barbara had treated so lightly that evening at Mrs. Strath's had resulted in complete prostration. She had never been quite strong since that long illness so many years ago, when she had turned her face to the wall and wept those sore, salt tears for her dead lover. Her strength often flagged, as it did now, and any excitement made her nerves irritable. Barbara

had rightly conjectured when in her sagacious way she had said to herself that it was this odd connection with Geoffrey Hunsden that was fretting her ill.

He had been here this evening, and had blundered and talked her into a fever. But she had been just as gentle with him as ever; and now he was gone she lay with closed eyes, trying to hide from Bab's scrutiny the tears that would keep brimming over them. She had the old heartache so bitterly this evening.

Barbara had devoted herself to her sister most certainly with a will, but in a thoroughly Barbara-like—or, as Leigh termed it, Barbaric—manner; that is, she had worked heartily and well, managing to insinuate in every other sentence, by word or tone, that Hester was herself three parts to blame for her illness, and Connie the other part; while she, Barbara herself, was decidedly the good-humored victim of their mismanagement. Hester, always unusually gentle in illness, swallowed the inuendoes, and accepted Bab's fussy little services with gratitude, and it was in a tone of unusual deference that she prefaced her remarks on this evening. Kindness begets kindness. Bab answered pleasantly, and then bent her shaggy little head over what was considered a striking likeness of Ben; while Ben himself, stretched at the feet of the young artist, regarded her out of the corner of one

red eye, the other winking and blinking the while in a state of semi-somnolence.

Barbara sucked her pencil meditatively, and considered him. "There, I think I've done you justice, you beauty; but you must give me another sitting. Now I am ready, Essie; what do you want with me?"

"It is such a lovely evening, Barbara, and you have not been out to-day. Do you think Ben and you could execute a little commission for me at Dort's mill?"

"Ben and I are quite at your service. But Connie is out, and you will be all alone, Hester."

"Oh, I don't mind that," returned Hester, hastily. But she did not add—are we not all addicted to mental reservations?—that she was longing, pining to be alone with her own sad thoughts, and that the errand was a harmless little manœuvre to get Barbara out of the room—Barbara, who would whistle, and hum, and laugh in a breath. "Indeed I don't mind being alone. Geoffrey has tired me and made my head ache. I wish you would not encourage him to make such a noise, Barbara."

"I thought I was saving you the trouble of talking," returned Barbara, rather crest-fallen. How she had made Geoffrey laugh to be sure!

"Well, well," interrupted Hester, with something

of her old fretfulness; "it was only your want of tact, I suppose. But now about your errant Hill-yard has never sent up that sack of flour I ordered, and it is baking-day to-morrow."

"Why I thought Leigh offered to call at the mill as he passed this evening," said Barbara, doubtfully. "I know he told you so."

"What nonsense," answered her sister. "What has Leigh got to do with domestic matters? I never knew him offer to do an errand for me before, and if he did he would be sure to forget it before the day was over."

"Very well, then, I will walk over; and perhaps I shall go on towards Briarsley to meet him. He said he should be late to-night."

"Do as you like," returned Hester, wearily, and closing her eyes; a hint on which Barbara immediately acted by calling to Ben in a loud whisper, slamming the door noisily, and then, in her contrition, opening and shutting it like a mouse, after which she scuttled across the hall, and raced Ben three steps at a time, to the tune of clanging doors and joyous whistling, to which latter harmony Ben kept dubious time by the thumping of his heavy tail against the floor.

Barbara had rather chafed against her indoor life, and was wild to be out in the air. She had been longing over and over again to pay a second visit to

Dort's Mill, but Hester's illness had prevented her; now, however, she had leave and licence to enjoy herself to the full this lovely evening. The air was so soft, the road so white and crisp, and the hedge-rows so full of tangled loveliness that Barbara could not contain herself for glee; her feet would go dancing along with springy steps; Norman, tying up his horse to the paling of a roadside cottage, took off his hat to her gravely enough as she passed, and then stood watching the child-figure and the little twinkling feet that were literally flitting over the daisy grass.

Barbara left off her dance now, and began looking up with wistful eyes to the summer blue above, where long white clouds were trailing and coiling their lengths like snow serpents, some with silver scales or ragged fringes of gold.

How sweetly the birds were singing their evening hymns. How strangely the harsh clanging of the rooks and the pert call of the cuckoo seemed to blend with the softer notes. What a black blue the firs were to-night, and what a sullen red gloom was in their depths, mingled here and there with crimson fire, where the first sunset rays smote between their straight stems. "One rarely sees pictures of pine woods," thought Barbara, as she stood still leaning on the low wooden paling; "artists seem fonder of painting oaks and beeches,

and all the warped and gnarled old parents of the wood. They seize on grotesque forms—at least Gustave Doré does—trees that look a tragedy in themselves. Now, if I could paint well—which I must and will—I would have nothing but fir woods, with perhaps a solitary figure; a granddame in her red cloak, or a boy gathering faggots; a group of children gathered round a dead squirrel, or perhaps a pair of lovers. Sometimes I would have no figures at all; nothing but that distance and coloring. Look at its burning crimson, as if the pines were on fire. Or perhaps I would paint what I love better still—the soft green gloom of a summer's afternoon—weird, still, profound; some people call it the blue shadow of the firs. They are color-blind; it is green, or yellowish-green; it is exquisite. All sorts of still shadows seem abroad. One could fancy some gentle, bloodless ghost gliding from stem to stem. Ah! what hours you and I have spent, Ben, lying on the dead bracken there, and dreaming wonderful dreams. We don't live, Ben; life has not come to us yet, but we have a glorious kingdom of our own in dreamland."

"There," continued Bab, still in the same quiet soliloquy, "there is the spot where I picked up Winnie. And now we must have a race to the very door of Dort's Mill, Ben. Stop there; twenty

yards in advance is your mistress's privilege; now—one, two, three, and we're off."

Ben was off decidedly, and had scoured the lane in the twinkling of an eye, while Bab, light of foot, but panting for breath, ran, and trotted, and hopped after him, and then stood fanning her heated face against the door-post of Dort's Mill.

"Now, be a gentleman, and lie still, Ben, till I come back." And Bab, opening the gate, found herself, with an odd feeling of pleasure, among the apple trees, beehives, and thymy borders of the old mill garden.

The little hall was empty as hitherto, but she could hear Winnie's chirruping voice somewhere in the outer premises as she knocked at the kitchen door.

There was a little hesitation, a silence, and then the same clear voice said, "Come in," and Bab entering found herself in the great sunny kitchen with its bowery lattices, the baby as before creeping and gurgling on the hearth; only there was a difference this evening—Bab was not the only visitor. There was a tall young man leaning against the open lattice, who turned round when she spoke. It was Leigh.

There was a slight flush on his face at Barbara's loud-spoken exclamation. But nothing could exceed the carelessness of his lounge, the gay indifference of his laugh; it was Leigh all over.

"So it is you, Babette, is it? and on the same errand I'll be bound. Did I not tell you, Miss Canham, that they would be sure not to trust my memory, and that another messenger would follow at my heels? Nevertheless, the sack of flour is on its way, Dame Muffet."

"I told Hester you would order it," returned Barbara, mightily perplexed, and quite unable to account for the curious feeling of discomfort that crossed her; and then not knowing exactly what to say she took the seat to which Ruth had mutely pointed. It was strange, and yet of course quite natural to find Leigh here; but then, why had he not given his message at the mill itself, and to one of the men? why was he so comfortably ensconced in the sunny kitchen, and looking quite at home in it? Was it curiosity to see the new schoolmistress that she and Hester had so highly vaunted that had led him there? If so, she wished she had bitten out her careless little tongue before she had told her foolish tale to him.

How handsome he looked too, "handsome Gypsy Leigh," as they called him; and what a saucy, care-for-nothing expression there was in his dark eyes, as he lounged against the window frame, pulling some rose leaves to pieces between his idle fingers, and tossing back his hair from his forehead in a careless way he had. Barbara felt an odd twinge of

pain. "Why are you here?" she asked, in her honest blunt way; and then she looked at Ruth. She had scarcely raised her eyes since Barbara entered. She was at work in her old place, with her restless foot moving the rocker of the empty cradle in the same absent manner; but this evening she was not pale. There was a beautiful changing colour on her face, and something of suppressed restlessness in her whole mien. She was handsomer than ever, Barbara was obliged to own.

"Oh, why are you here?" faltered the little sister, quite unable to explain her own dismay.

Leigh gave one of his light laughs, and aimed a rose-leaf pellet at her.

"Why am I here?" he repeated carelessly; "that 'why' is easily accounted for, Barbara, since Paul Hillyard was out, no men about the premises, so I made bold to come up to the mill kitchen and entrust my message to Miss Canham." He gave her a quick look as he spoke. "Miss Canham and I are old acquaintances. Rolf and I have been down to the school once or twice, and had no end of a lark; and as you came in, the sack of flour having been despatched, we were talking about a plan of mine for giving the children a lecture."

"A lecture! Are you serious, Leigh?"

"Why not? How grave you look, Barbara.

Why should I not turn my time and talents to account if I like, though it is only to please dunces of children? We were just having a warm dispute when you tapped at the door. I wanted something scientific—solar system, meteors, or natural history; and Ruth," he bit his lip, "was all for amusement and a magic-lantern."

"A lecture! oh, it's all right then," blurted out Barbara, and she drew a long breath of relief.

"What's all right, and what do you mean, little mystery?" returned Leigh in a surprised tone, and with elevated eyebrows; but Ruth, quicker of comprehension, colored down to the tips of her fingers, and bent lower over her work. Leigh gave her another of his keen, watchful looks, and rattled on. "I recommended we should toss up, but Miss Canham referred me to the vicar. Won't it be fun? You'll help me on the platform, Bab, and we'll have the whole village gaping and staring at us."

"I think Ruth's idea much the wiser," said Barbara, roused at last to interest, and speaking more like her old self. "Who ever heard of astronomical lectures for small school children? you would want diagrams and all sorts of things besides, and then they would not understand a word. No, the magic-lantern by all means."

"Yes, I think it will be best," said Ruth, forcing

herself to speak; "but we must talk to the vicar about it, he may not like the expense; but as I told your brother, it is of no use starting the subject yet, for the children are going to have their summer treat, and a magic-lantern is only fit for the winter."

"True, I forgot," replied Leigh, confusedly; there is no occasion for us to discuss the matter just now. What a hot evening it is," he continued in a fatigued tone, "and how much I should like a glass of that excellent cider that my sister praised so, if I might ask such a favour." And he threw himself down in the wooden rocking-chair in an easy, good-humored way, and snapped his fingers at the baby, who chirruped and crawled towards him.

Ruth rose with a heightened color and left the room, calling to Winnie as she did so.

"I think you are very free and easy, Leigh, and make yourself very much at home everywhere," said Bab, wondering; but Leigh only laughed and snapped his fingers the louder.

"Come here, you young sir, Issachar, Jacob, whatever's your name—I know it's biblical. Oh, you want to come up, do you? Well, come along," and Leigh hoisted the fair laughing boy on to his knee. "Now, what's the next proceeding?"

The next proceeding was decidedly uninviting; several moist and coal-begrimed fingers scrabbled

delightedly over his face, and a dimpled fist was thrust lovingly into his eye.

"Oh, Naphtali, Naphtali!" groaned Leigh, emerging with roughened head and blinking eyes, "you have taken honours, I should think, in infantine prize-fighting, or you would never have darkened my sky-light in one round in that highly scientific manner."

The baby crowed and stamped with its rosy, curled-up feet, gurgling deliciously with infantine bubblings and mutterings. Barbara thought she had never seen anything so pretty. Perhaps Ruth thought so too; for, after she had given Leigh the cider, and sat down to her work, her eyes dwelt upon the babe with sweet pathetic lingerings, and something seemed to thaw her proud reserve; and when by-and-by, exhausted with its joy, it had fallen asleep on Leigh's knee, all of a heap, as kittens do, she stretched out her arms, smiling and yearning for the boy, with all a woman's worship stamped on her fair face.

What is this worship, this adoration instinctive and profound, that agitates the true woman at the shrine of purity and helplessness; this love, all giving, selfless, asking for no return, common alike to the married and the unmarried, maid or matron, down to the confines of old age, strong as death, bordering even the grave itself?

Agony of maternity, fond worshipping love, bowing low before embodied innocence, from the time when the Jewish women, strong in their hopes of giving a Messiah to the world, cried out, with loving impulsive Rachel, "Give me children, or I die," to the day when the Blessed Maid hung worshipping and adoring over her wondrous Babe, even to the present day, yea, till this old worn world shall totter blindly to its close—women, wedded or unwedded, shall offer their sweet incense at the feet of unconscious purity, sometimes with hungry longing, sometimes with full fruition before these fragile lilies of the earth. Ah! loving, womanly hearts that crave and are not satisfied, He that "took up the young children in His arms to bless them," who "set a little child in the midst," shall He not freely give you all things? for "more are the children of the desolate than the children of the married wife, saith the Lord."

Something of this instinctive worship revealed itself in the tender shining of Ruth's eyes, as she stooped over the baby with outstretched arms. "He is asleep," she said, with all sorts of gentle hushes in her voice. "Look how his small pink foot has nestled itself into your hand; let me take him and lay him in his cradle;" but Leigh refused.

"No, no; let him be till we go. What is his name? Reuben? I thought it was Dan or Zebu-

lon. What a fine little fellow he is! and look, how he is smiling in his sleep!"

"Where is Winnie all this time?" asked Barbara. She was sitting apart from them, looking out into the shadowy orchard with dreamy, far-away eyes. Ruth came and sat by her.

"Anna is putting her to bed; she has been in fine mischief in the poultry yard, and was not fit to appear, though she was all anxiety to see the big doggie's little lady, as she calls you. Are you tired, Miss Heathcote? I fancy you are; or are you looking at the young moon just rising behind the great apple-tree?"

"I believe I am a little tired," said Barbara, slowly; "but I was not looking at the moon or anything in particular." "She thinks I am quiet and strange to-night," thought Bab to herself. "Perhaps I am; I can't make her out; I can't make any one out. I believe her silence disappoints me." As though guessing her thought, Ruth fixed her great brown eyes full on her; their wistfulness startled Barbara.

"We are all quiet to-night; you are, Miss Heathcote, and I know I am; one has the heartache so sorely at times." Then, hastily, as if she feared any misconception of her meaning, "I have been thinking of my old home a great deal this evening."

"Dairy Mead Farm, you mean?"

"Yes, dear, old Dairy Mead. Naomi and Paul have gone there to-day. To-morrow it will pass into other hands, the old homestead that has gone from father to son for seventy years or more."

"Was your father a farmer?" The question came from Leigh, but she answered as though it were Barbara.

"I believe you would call him a yeoman, Miss Heathcote. It was only a slip of a farm, but well stocked with cattle. The dairy was our special pride. It was a sore trial to Naomi to leave it, and such a beautiful dairy it was too, the largest and best room in the house. Reuben—that was our brother—had made a pretty little spring bubble and play out of the stone floor; and often and often have I taken my work of a summer's afternoon and sat listening to the little cool splashes, and thought I could not find a pleasanter place in a king's palace —dear old Dairy Mead!"

"Was Reuben the brother who went away?" It was Leigh again who spoke, but her face was turned towards Barbara.

"Yes, Naomi and I lived with him, till Paul Hillyard came to Dairy Mead and made Naomi his wife."

"How very strange!" began Barbara; and then she stopped, awkwardly enough.

"What was very strange, Miss Heathcote?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing, at least," she stammered, in her downright honest truth, which was at once Barbara's greatest virtue and failing too; "it was only that I could not help thinking it strange that Paul Hillyard should choose your sister, and not you."

Ruth colored exceedingly, whether from the implied compliment or because the words jarred upon her, was not easy to know. Leigh came to her rescue, though with a touch of displeasure in his voice that Barbara was not slow to perceive.

"You must not mind my sister's abrupt speeches —nobody does who knows her; it is one of Bab's idiosyncrasies—of which she has as many as a philosopher—that men only choose their wives for good looks, and not for such superfluous articles as good temper, hidden worth, &c. One of these days she will find herself mistaken when somebody chooses her."

Barbara reddened and looked annoyed. Ruth answered very gently—

"No one need be surprised at Paul marrying Naomi, though he was the handsomest man in the parish, and she such a pale sickly creature; for Naomi has that which is above beauty, and makes him an excellent wife—they are very united."

"And you like being at Dort's Mill?"

"Yes, dearly, I am very happy—too happy sometimes, I fear, or else I dream that I am."

"There are some dreams that know no waking; that will be yours. Barbara, are you ready? I think it is time that we go home."

"Yes, I am ready," said Barbara, rousing herself. "Time? why it is full moonlight."

"But you will come again, Miss Heathcote; say that you will come when I am alone—on a Wednesday evening. Naomi is always out then, and we will have a long quiet talk together." And Ruth held her hand warmly—almost caressingly.

"Wednesday? you can come any other evening, can't you, Barbara?" Why such an impatient voice, Leigh?

"Oh yes," answered Barbara readily; but Ruth interrupted her—

"No, I would rather it were Wednesday. Please do not disappoint me, Miss Heathcote."

"Oh no, I will not. Next Wednesday then; Hester will be all right by that time. Good-bye, Ruth, give my love to the 'ittle shrimp.'"

"Good-bye, Miss Canham." Leigh hesitated, then offered his hand; it touched hers—oh, so slightly.

Barbara lingered by the gate to caress Ben.

"Wait a moment, Bab, I have left my gloves in

the mill kitchen I believe—yes, what a careless fellow I am. Walk on slowly, and I will overtake you in another minute."

"Very well," said Bab, and then she walked on meditating—"What a queer world it is," said Bab to herself, "why cannot I make up my mind about Ruth Canham? She is good—she is beautiful," "but she is not what I thought her; is it that that disappoints me, I wonder. Last time I fell headlong in love with her, Naomi, and everything; this evening I felt odd, suspicious, out-of-sorts, and she saw it." The rest of Bab's soliloquy was cut short by Leigh's step behind her, as he came up panting and flushed with exercise.

"Well, Babchen, what a pace you go; it's Wednesday, is it?"

"Yes," said Barbara, linking her arm in his, and turning her face eagerly towards him. "Well, what do you think of my new friend?"

"Your new friend?—excuse me, Bab, but I can't help laughing; what queer animals you women are to be sure. You see each other, exchange a few words, stare each other out of countenance, then with a gush of sentiment swear eternal friendship 'till death do us part,' and all that sort of thing, you know, which lasts a few weeks, or months perhaps, till another sweet creature turns up, and then it's off with the old love, and on with the new."

"You disagreeable old cynic, what's that burst of philosophy for?"

"I could not help it; your expression provoked it. But seriously, Barbara, I do honestly admire your lack of pride in choosing a friend so below your own station; there's something noble in it—you are a superb little radical, Bab."

"I don't know," remarked Barbara modestly. "I can't see any merit in what is obviously so right. Why should there not be a freemasonry between women as between men—sex and virtue levelling disparity of rank and fortune. For myself I disclaim those old-world prejudices. I would as willingly make a friend of the postman's daughter as of a Duchess, if she were refined as well as good."

"And I admire you for it," repeated Leigh eagerly.

Something in his tone reminded Barbara of the imprudence of avowing such sentiments to one always ready to overlook the distinctions of caste, and with some inward trepidation she endeavoured to modify her last speech.

"I was sure you would approve of my new friend, or whatever you call her, and could not but be alive to her general superiority in tone and manner. It is all right for me, you know, to express these sentiments of fraternity and equality with my own sex,

but it does not hold good in your case; it would never do for you, you know, to be dawdling up at Dort's Mill—it would have an odd look, to say the least of it, and be very bad taste besides."

"Who said I intended visiting at Dort's mill?" began Leigh angrily; then checking himself—"I suppose you're a little blab, Babchen—all women are—but if you go and make a fuss about it at home, that's your affair, it's nothing to me, remember. A pretty thing it would be if it were spread about in the village that Dr. Heathcote's son was seen dawdling about the mill."

"That is what I say," remonstrated Barbara; "that is exactly why I recommended prudence, because people will talk, of course. I don't mean to treat Hester to a résumé of this evening—a pretty fuss she would make about it."

"Come, that's right; you are a sensible little soul, Barbara. You know," he continued coaxingly, "it was all an accident; the men were away from the mill—the water-power low, I suppose—so I just stepped up to the house; and your being there made me stop on—I thought there could be no harm in it."

"No more there was, I suppose; I was only recommending caution for the future; but what did you think of Ruth?" she added, cunningly. "Did my description hold good?"

"You mean about her eyes; well, they are rather like a cow's—large and plaintive, as you said. Oh, she is well enough—handsome, of course," he added carelessly; "one never expects those large women to be very graceful in their movements."

"Why, Leigh!" cried Barbara, disappointed at this captious criticism, "I can't think how you can have the heart or inclination to find fault with such a beautiful creature."

"Well, she is beautiful," admitted Leigh, reluctantly; "but one could see in a moment that she had not learnt deportment in a dancing-school. She has too much dignity to be awkward; but she rather lumbered across the room, I thought, and she did not hold her head well."

Barbara gazed at him in speechless surprise. There was a little vein of humor underlying Leigh's remark that seemed to detract from any covert inconsistency. There was a hot sparkle in his eye besides. Barbara could not make him out at all.

"Well, well," she returned, impatiently, "did you find your gloves when you went back?"

"My gloves!" said Leigh, confusedly. "Ah! my gloves—I remember. We looked for them, but they were lying snugly in my pocket all the time."

CHAPTER IX.

BARBARA ENACTS THE PART OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN.

> "Kindness in women, not their beauteous looks,
> Shall win my love."—*Shakspeare.*

"BEN, Ben, do you hear me, sir? come here directly!"

Ben, who was burrowing delightedly in a dry grassy ditch, flapped his tail disconsolately at the peremptory word of command, and came up, his head very much on one side and his great curly ears drooping visibly.

"Ben, Ben," said Bab, flicking him playfully with the little hazel switch she carried in her hand, "what do you mean by hunting rabbits, sir? Do you know St. Ronans will shoot you for a poacher? and then poor Bab will cry and never be comforted for her four-legged friend;" and rather overpowered by this picture her imagination had conjured up, Bab knelt down, and, gathering the great black head in her arms, kissed the glossy forehead—caresses in which Ben would willingly have joined with many

grateful slobbers; but fearing another rebuke from his little mistress, he contented himself with placing his bushy paws upon her shoulders, a proceeding which invariably knocked her down. "Now you've been and gone and done it, you bad dog; and rumpled my clean muslin the first time I've put it on," said Bab, as she rose from the ground with a flushed face, and contemplated the creases ruefully. "What will Hester say to me, I wonder? Come now, do let us be sensible, Ben. I am tired of racing and being thrown down. Come and sit by me among this delicious bracken;" and Bab, untying her hat, nestled quietly down into her ferny nook; while Ben, obedient and watchful as a sentinel, reared himself up behind her, and sat grinning down at her with his red tongue hanging lovingly out of his mouth.

And Bab sat in the tall green bracken and looked out on the blue blackness of the firs around her, and down the long aisle, where a slanting bar of sunset glory heralded the fires of declining day; and then up at one golden cloud that lay folded in light, like the hem of a seraph's robe, and her heart seemed full of reflected beauty; stirred with strange yearnings—movements of expectant bliss.

I have said that Bab was never truer to herself than when alone—and I have said only the truth. Removed from the jarring circumstances of daily

life—from contact with minds that certainly failed to assimilate with hers, and brought face to face with nature; its mighty pulse beating within her heart, stirring it with its wonderful truth, its perfection of form, its unspoken revelations; waking in her, responsive symphonies that startled her with their very sweetness, rousing her to new efforts of thought and filling her with a thousand vague sensations of love and awe that made her seek—child-woman as she was—for beauty within beauty, the creator amid the created.

"What is truth!" alas! how many doubtful ones groping in the realms of reason by the light of nature have demanded that question of the ages moving in their myriad revolutions within the cycle of eternity, and have had their question flung back relentlessly at the feet of their invincible ignorance, seeing that they sought it by the miserable torch-light of science in the very face of Truth itself. "What is truth?" Ah! blind led by the blind—searching for the philosopher's stone in the pitiless dust of humanity, look up from the skeletons of the past, the paltry dreams of the future, to where the rent veil reveals the Holy of Holies!

Oh, Truth! so simple that a little child can lead thee. Oh, mystery! so mighty that human intellect faints and expires at thy feet; when shall

this Babel of human reason and materialistic wisdom fall shattered before one pierced Hand, holding in its bleeding palm the lamp of truth?

Barbara, in her defective womanhood, her imperfect knowledge, asked this question of herself, seeking it in her own heart and in the revealed beauties of nature, groping for it darkly amid the outward and visible forms of a religion whose inward sacramental graces were as yet sealed to her. She beat and baffled herself, poor child, on the waves of a troublesome world, now rising, now falling with every change of wind and circumstances, pelted sadly by many a bitter salt-sea wave, tossed wearily by many an ungoverned impulse, clinging to waifs and strays and such like weak supports that wrecked and went to pieces in her hand; while all the time the church, with its open portals, floated like an ark of refuge, close to her, its tender charities reaching out helpful hands to the wilful mariner.

In talking thus of Barbara, I am reminded of a picture I have once seen—a mere sketch, the world would pass it by; but it is simple, touching, mightily suggestive of the things that belong to our peace. Nothing but a stretch of sea and sky, a few dark rippling waves—slight indications of a stormy cloud or two—a figure mediæval, devout, kneeling on a simple raft, a rough-hewn wooden cross that carries

her safely through waves and tempest, contrary winds and heavenly calms, to the haven where she would be.

But Barbara, like many another, had not reached the cross. She had to grope her way to it, as Mrs. Strath so justly remarked, through the long darkness of pain.

On such an evening as this, soft and profoundly calm, when daylight and sunset seem to commingle in glorious colored fires of crimson, purple, and gold, veiling the west, Barbara's thoughts would surge unbidden, circling all sorts of weird abysses and fervent Paradisal heights; odd imaginary doubts, singular dreams, and dreamlike realities coursing each other through her hot busy brain while she looked out on the horizon, lending its blue distance so enchantingly to her eyes.

This seething mixture of thought frothed over her whole life, unsettling its intent and purpose, for her dreams did not match her realities, or her realities her dreams; hence, discontent was the result. She would not fit herself in her home place, its narrowness fretted her. She chafed at the barrier sex and circumstance had put before her, she, who was made for better and for higher things—what things Barbara could not have exactly specified; but yesterday and to-day the impulse had seized her that she must be an artist.

She had always loved form and coloring; her pencil and crayon had been her delight from childhood, and her execution was by no means despicable; indeed the efforts of her crude and untaught genius had often surprised the home circle, meagre judges as they were in all things pertaining to art. It was Norman Strath who first perceived the dawnings of her power, and took pity on her wasted strength; and Barbara had been made very happy to-day, for her father had bade her show Norman all her unfinished sketches—her odd designs and pencilled-out thoughts, and Norman had been quite unable to suppress his expressions of surprise and admiration.

"Barbara design this, then Barbara is a self-taught artist: and it is a sin and a shame to let a talent like this rust for want of a little training. You must give her some lessons, sir." So spoke keen-sighted Norman, the man who admired so little—who so rarely praised, and his eyes had looked at her for a moment with an unusual deference and respect. Barbara felt her ambitious little heart swell at this recognition of her power. Speechless, blushing, almost timidly, she had received the first spoken homage of mind to mind; but it sank down into her heart never to be forgotten; and then she had rushed off to share her joy with Mrs. Strath, and having made this her safety-

valve for her intense feelings of pride and happiness, she had treated Ben to a race in the fir woods, stimulated almost childishly by this sudden influx of sunshine.

"I shall be an artist; yes, now I shall be an artist," said Bab; and then in her happy day-dream she planned herself a studio, a real studio, with carved cabinets and wonderful scraps of gorgeous coloring, Indian scarfs, tapestry, and ruby velvet curtains, curious articles of bric-a-brac, and ormulu, a studio fit for a princess.

Revelling in this imaginary picture, Barbara had just stationed herself, palette in hand before her easel, with Leigh as her first sitter, when the quick brushing of footsteps through the underwood suddenly recalled her to real life again. The fir plantations, or pine woods, as Bab called them, bordered on the Brackley Road, and in reality belonged to the house they called St. Ronans, or St. Ronans' Hall, as it was properly, but the old place, owing to family misfortunes, having passed into the hands of strange owners, who had again put it up to auction, it had been for a long time left deserted, and except in nutting and blackberry seasons, Barbara and Ben had the old woods much to themselves, and it was therefore with a sensation of curiosity, not wholly unmixed with fear, that Barbara listened to the firm crunching of the stranger's footsteps sounding nearer

and nearer. That Ben shared her suspicions was clear by the way in which he reared himself on his haunches, and listened with cocked ear and a most ominous growl, which deepened into thorough bass, as a young man, in a shooting coat, appeared in sight, his gun thrown carelessly over his shoulder.

"Hush, Ben, hush! why I do believe it is St. Ronans himself," and Barbara's little hands held Ben's black muzzle, in such dread of an outbreak, that she was able only to take a most cursory view of the young sportsman, though he walked slowly and looked curiously at them both as he passed, and then she leant forward eagerly, and looked after him till his footsteps sounded out of sight. "It is St. Ronans," said Barbara to herself; "I am certain of it. Now I wish I could have observed him more closely; it was all Ben's fault, for I know he looked at us enough as he passed. How well he walked, not a bit lame, though I fancied afterwards there was a slight limp, a very slight limp—a sort of drag of one foot; and how well he carried his head, rather haughtily I thought. He is not as tall as Leigh—no, not nearly; but I wish I had seen more of his face, it was good-looking, I think, and rather pale. Good gracious!" Barbara's exclamation was called forth by the sudden report of a gun, which seemed to go off quite near them, and to which Ben responded by a most angry growl.

"I don't call that gentlemanly," said Barbara, turning rather pale with her start. "He ought not to have let off that gun so near us, it is not safe, and it enrages Ben so. Why, he is hardly out of sight yet, and can scarcely have reached the little gate by the bracken path; perhaps he did it out of mischief, to give Ben and me a fright—it was very wrong," and Bab stood doubtful for a moment; for, in common with many of her sex, this small woman had a great horror of guns.

She wanted to find her way out of this twilight wood, its spell was broken for the nonce by the intruder's step, but it had only one outlet, the gate by the bracken path, the other gate, which was at the further end of the plantations, led into the shrubberies and lawns of St. Ronans. Bab stood and hesitated. What strange beings we human creatures are; at certain crises of our life all sorts of instincts and presentiments seem to propel us on and on contrary to our will, nay, sometimes contrary to our own rightful sense, till we are fain to abandon the rudder and oars that we hitherto used, and follow an invisible guide which may haply turn out a mere Will-o'-the-wisp, to engulf us to our own destruction, and yet often in this way we have entertained angels unawares.

Barbara never knew what curious instinct made her follow that formidable gun, and in spite of

nervous fears, led her to exchange her safe retreat for the dangers of the bracken path; she only paced along in her little old fashioned dignity, and trusted devoutly that providence would protect her.

Just where the wood ends and the open begins, there was a little white gate, and an old stunted tree trunk beside it. Barbara coming out from the firs, was almost tempted to seek their cover again, when she saw the young sportsman she had styled St. Ronans, sitting on the trunk beside the gate. There was a little quick contest between dignity and cowardice, and then dignity prevailed, and Barbara made good her advance; she would have a good look at him as she passed, and as she came up her eyes opened wide for the purpose, but at the first glance, dignity, cowardice, reserve, were all forgotten, and she had sprung to his side with the loud uttered exclamation that most women use when in great dismay.

For she had caught sight of one hand streaming with blood. "Good heavens!" came involuntarily from her lips, and then she hid her eyes a moment from the ghastly sight.

The young man raised his head and looked at her; his face was very white, as though it were with pain, and he bit his lip hard to suppress a groan, but he eyed her keenly for all that.

"I have shot myself, that's all; the gun burst in

my hand, there's no use calling out; if you wish to help me, give me a handkerchief, please."

The tone was irritable, peremptory. Barbara, in spite of her fear, found time to wonder at it.

"I have two handkerchiefs, but they are very small," said Barbara, dragging them forth with feverish haste.

"Well, mine is a large one," said the young man, impatiently; "it's no use talking, you know, while I am bleeding to death—if I had any one but a girl to help me!" he added, in a tone of despair. "I can't bind it up with one hand, you must do it for me."

The must acted on Barbara's weak nerves like magic; she was standing by him, shaking in every limb, and quite as white as he was; the sight of blood was terrible to Barbara.

"I will try," she said, faintly, and it really spoke well for her courage; true, she shrank back once when she first touched the wounded limb, it was mangled so hideously, but she did her task well, though tremblingly, with little odd catches in her breath every now and then.

"I think that will do," she said, looking up at him; he was leaning back against the gate with his eyes closed and his nether lip bitten in painfully, but he roused himself up at her voice.

"Is it done? you have been a long time about

it; are you sure you have bandaged it tightly enough—there is the knot coming undone."

"I will tie it again," returned Barbara, meekly; "leave it to me, please." He looked so deadly faint that she forgave his impatience and irritability, though she was doing her best for him.

"I wish I could get you a little water, but there is no cottage near. If you can walk, you must come with me to a doctor, unless I fetch him here—but no, it will never do to leave you alone; it is not far, do you think you could get to Dr. Heathcote's?"

"I must, or I shall have lock-jaw setting in. Stay, which is the nearer, Dr. Heathcote's or St. Ronans?"

"Oh, Dr. Heathcote's. You have only to go down the bracken path, through two little fields, and into the Brackley road, and the lane is just opposite."

"Then I will try, if you will lend me your arm."

"My shoulder, rather," said Barbara, with a little nervous laugh—her teeth quite chattered as she spoke. "I am so little, you see. But stay, I must contrive a sling for your hand, it must not hang down like that. Can you give me off that silk handkerchief?" she added, pointing timidly to the blue handkerchief he wore knotted loosely round

his throat; he pulled it off hastily, and handed it to her, and she soon contrived a more comfortable rest.

He watched her hasty movements without a word, save a brief "thank you," the first he had said yet, and then rose feebly from his seat, hesitating a moment, as though scarcely able to move.

"Open the gate, Ben," said Barbara, decidedly, and then she took the young man's hand; she was doing everything unconsciously, and with the most utter forgetfulness of self, and placed it firmly on her shoulder. "Lean hard—use me as a walking-stick; I am strong though I am so little."

The first glimmer of a smile came to St. Ronans eyes—we call him by Barbara's appellative—as he moved slowly along, but it speedily died away in his increasing faintness.

"Any other man would be able to bear up against a little pain," he muttered discontentedly; "but I am a bad subject for it—it is this confounded faintness that I can't fight against," and he grasped Barbara's shoulder so tightly that she with difficulty suppressed a little cry of pain.

"How does the hand feel?" she asked, cheerfully, ignoring her own discomfort—"is it more comfortable?"

"Ugh, don't mention it—and serve me right for a fool to be at my boyish pranks again, leaping a

hedge with a loaded gun—though what made it go off puzzles me."

"That was the shot that startled me so," said Barbara, with a little gasp; she would dream of that wound all night, she knew.

"I suppose so. Don't walk so fast, please—is it much further? Well, there's only one thing to be said, I've settled myself this time, and it's a case of lock-jaw."

"Extremes meet," says the old adage; tragedy often approaches the ludicrous; we laugh the tears into our eyes; sometimes in our heaviest moments a hateful mirth puckers up our face, irresistibly comic ideas intrude themselves. Bab still trembling and pale from her efforts, and painfully alive to the heavy grip on her shoulder, almost hysterical, indeed, in her great pity and fear, felt oddly tickled at the coolness with which St. Ronans stated his case, and the fretful tone in which everything was spoken.

"I don't know," she said, a little doubtfully, and then she felt as though she must laugh, and so she called to Ben instead.

"Of course it will be a case of lock-jaw. A man of my susceptible temperament will never escape that. I am not sure that tetanus will not follow."

"Oh, please, don't," began Barbara, all her

muscles giving way, and then frightened, as she undoubtedly was, about the result, she began laughing hysterically.

"Oh, please don't," said Barbara again, wiping her eyes and almost crying. "I don't mean to be unkind, but I am so frightened, and you make me worse; don't talk like that." And she replaced his hand, feeling very much ashamed of herself.

St Ronans looked at her, and his eyes twinkled in spite of himself.

"That is one way to treat an unfortunate fellow, Miss—Miss"—and he hesitated.

"Miss Heathcote — Barbara Heathcote," said poor little Bab; "don't say any more about it, Mr. Strath, it is better than crying, anyhow; lean heavier. I wish I could help you more."

"You know my name," he began — and then stopped. "Is it much further, Miss Heathcote?"

"No; we are in the middle of the next field. Stand still a minute—ah, how white you look," and Barbara, for all her laugh, could have wrung her hands when she saw his poor suffering face.

"It is this faintness," he muttered.

"Yes, and there's no water to be got," and Barbara looked round her in despair, and then to her horror she saw dark stains oozing through the bandages.

"I have not done it right, and he will bleed to death," she said to herself. "Ah, whatever shall I do? Come, come," she said, trying to rally his courage, and her own too, "the house is in sight—there, you can see the chimneys half hidden by trees; try and walk," and she put her arm round him as though he were a child, and drew him on, and then, half leading and half supporting him, she got him into the Brackley Road, and looked round for help.

No one in sight—only a stretch of white, dusty road. Barbara uttered a weary sigh, the drops of perspiration stood on her brow, and her arms ached and trembled with the strain, but she drew him on, and he obeyed her guidance, moving his limbs more mechanically and heavily every moment.

"Now we've crossed the road and are in the lane," she said, talking hurriedly, as though to stimulate him to fresh exertion, "and here's the house, the one with the green door; perhaps the servants will see us, and come out to help us; one step down, now three low, broad steps; this is the hall, there is a sofa somewhere, only it is so dark—keep up, keep up, do, my arms are breaking. Ah, poor fellow, poor fellow, he has fainted," and she could not help crying out as he dropped heavily from her hold, on to the friendly cushions waiting to receive him.

The dragging footsteps, and Barbara's loudly uttered exclamation, brought out Hester.

"Who's that? Is that you, Barbara?"

And then she stood in speechless amazement, for Barbara was on her knees chafing the hand of what looked like a dead man.

"Some water; don't stand looking at me—where is Daddie or Norman; fetch them, Hester, quick, or he will bleed to death."

CHAPTER X.

WHICH IS CHIEFLY INTROSPECTIVE.

"What reed was that on which I leant?
Oh, backward fancy, wherefore wake
The old bitterness again and break
The low beginnings of content."
In Memoriam.

"HUSH, child, you don't know what you are talking about," said a brusque voice, breaking in authoritatively on Barbara's agitated little sentences. "What we want now, Hester, is a light; I can do nothing in this semi-darkness, and at the same time you may bring water, smelling-salts, or anything else you think useful; fetch them yourself, we don't want the household round us — the quieter the better; and now, Barbara, stand a little further off, please, and let us see who and what you've got there."

The cool professional voice worked wonders. Hester, always observant and ready in emergencies, rallied from her first surprise, and moved off swiftly in search of the articles she knew he re-

quired, while Barbara, gladly relinquishing the cold hand she was trying to chafe, stood breathlessly at the foot of the couch, while Norman gently turned the senseless face round to the light.

"Hold the lamp, Barbara, closely; steadily, please, we don't want any hand-shakes at present. Now let's see—whom have we here; umph, my cousin Westmoreland—nay, my fair cousin," and Norman smiled sardonically into his beard, perhaps to hide deeper feelings. The next moment, however, he was skilfully laying bare the wounded hand, and directing Hester what remedies to apply to bring his patient back to consciousness, but nothing ever escaped Dr. Strath; even in the midst of his intent examination, he had noticed Hester's shudder, as the mutilated hand came to sight, and as soon as St. Ronans showed signs of rallying, he said very quietly but peremptorily, "That will do, Hester, thank you; we have no more need of your services, Barbara will do all I want; put the lamp down on the bracket, Barbara, and give me that roll of bandages off the table, and the little case you see beside it."

No one ever disobeyed Norman, and Hester drew off now and shrugged her shoulders slightly. She thought it very strange of him, in fact, she could hardly believe her ears, that she—Hester—always so praised for her ready help and presence of mind,

should be asked to withdraw her services, while Bab —careless, left-handed Bab, remained. No wonder the young mistress curled her lip and shrugged her shoulders, as she crossed the great hall, unwilling to go, but far too proud to stay. Norman Strath knew what he was about for all that; he gave his quick orders, and Barbara executed them to the best of her small ability, her great willingness supplying her want of tact, and it was her watchful glance that detected the first glimmer of consciousness in the patient's eyes; he had opened them once or twice, but had seemed stupefied.

"He is coming-to now," she whispered, and at the sound of her voice the young man's heavy eyelids unclosed full on the doctor's face. Norman's grave eyes seemed to startle him.

"Where am I?" he said feebly, trying to raise himself, then as he looked down on his bandaged hand, "Oh, I know; she brought me here, but where—where?" and he tried to turn his head to where Barbara stood.

"Come here, Barbara, he wants to see and identify you," said Norman, in his bright professional voice. "You have much to thank her for, for she did her best, and though her efforts at surgery were rather rude, they were not without effect."

Barbara blushed high, for she detected true appreciation in those few words of praise.

"Yes, I know," said St. Ronans, wearily, as he sank back after his brief scrutiny. "I am much obliged to her. Well, so we have met again, Norman."

Dr. Strath leaned over him with a frank, pleasant smile.

"Yes, Nigel, and very unexpectedly, but I wish it were under happier auspices; you have been very unfortunate."

"I was born under an unlucky star, I believe," replied the other, with a return of the old fretful voice. "A pleasing event with which to inaugurate my return to England, to have a loaded gun explode in one's hand!"

"Do you think it will be attended by lock-jaw or tetanus?" asked Barbara in a very grave voice.

Never doctor frowned down on a luckless questioner as Dr. Strath frowned on Barbara—it might have annihilated her.

"I can't help it," she returned, with the same concise gravity. "He says he is just the subject for one or the other; and, from what I could make out, fully expected it."

The same half-smile that had before flitted across St. Ronans' face came again to eye and lip, and even Norman relaxed his frown.

"Oh, if it is Nigel's question, I have nothing to

say. He was always very apt at self-tormenting, and by his own account is peculiarly alive to all the ills that human flesh is heir to; but come, Miss Barbara, if you agitate my patient with unnecessary talk you will have to answer for it; we must have perfect quiet, if you please."

"But I ought to be going home, Norman," said Nigel, faintly; "my mother will be frightened. Some one must have the carriage sent for."

"I will be the courier of bad tidings, to tell Lady Strath of your little mishap; but as for St. Ronans to-night, I interdict it. Barbara, you have enacted the part of Good Samaritan to my unlucky cousin by binding up his wounds, now you must find a lodging for him; for he won't leave this house to-night with my consent."

"Certainly—there is the chintz room," said Barbara, with ready alacrity, willing to expiate her foolish speech. "Hester will have it ready in no time;" and she tripped away.

Nigel seemed about to speak, but Dr. Strath kindly and firmly laid a hand on his lips.

"No more to-night, Nigel; we will hear all about it to-morrow. There is plenty of time to renew our old intimacy. To-night I am only Dr. Strath, and you are the Master of St. Ronans."

Nigel smiled assent, and closed his eyes wearily. Norman remained quietly beside him, and Barbara,

returning, seated herself apart from them in the darkness, where she could see and not be seen.

She wanted to think. Her heart was full—so full—it seemed bursting with its thoughts. She must be alone a little while to try and reduce them to order. What a day it had been. She had been complaining that her life was barren and monotonous—a mere dragging mill-stream, barren of events and interest—and yet what great sparkles of sunlight had fallen to her share to-day.

She was pining for work, appreciation, and sympathy, never dreaming that she would ever meet with any, and all at once the last person she had thought capable of understanding her—Dr. Strath, the earnest thinker, the pitiless critic—had owned that there was power and imagination in her crude efforts—had said from his honest conviction that she was an artist, and had looked at her keenly, almost admiringly, as he said so.

And as though this were not sufficient for one day, she had been entangled in a mesh of circumstances that was almost tragedy—she had been placed for the first time in a horrible emergency, and had not been found altogether wanting. True, she had not performed anything particularly heroic, but she had not done amiss for all that. Norman had given her a word of praise, and had almost hinted that her ready help had saved Nigel; he had

asked her assistance instead of Hester's, which showed that he did not consider her the useless Barbara that Hester called her, and she had done so well that he had not spoken impatiently once. Barbara felt her heart beat pleasantly at the recollection, and she gave herself a little hug in the darkness. "You are not such a little silly as I took you for, Bab," she said to herself, with an approving nod. "You are only a poor little misplaced woman, after all;" and she smiled as she looked at the little circle of lamplight and watched Norman rise from his seat at Hester's signal, and gently support his cousin across the hall. She might have held the light for them, she remembered afterwards, but she preferred hugging herself and rocking to and fro in company with her thoughts. And what made it doubly pleasant was that she had rendered this opportune assistance to Mrs. Strath's nephew—she had done a service, as it were, to the woman she loved best in the world. Barbara liked to think of that; she felt glad she was interested in him.

He had a beautiful face, she thought, only there was something that spoilt it to her eyes; it might have been the proud irritable lines round the mouth, she did not like his mouth at all, she remembered it curved down so; and then she thought of his impatient voice, and gave a laugh at the recollection.

There was such a mingling of the spoilt child and the young autocrat in it—so irritable and peremptory, too; and it was so odd to address a strange lady in that way—"was it because she was so little?" Bab wondered; perhaps, with her dress huddled up, and her little round hat, he had taken her for a child, and Bab shivered and laughed, and shivered again, and wondered why she still felt that odd lump in her throat when she was so happy, and whatever made her tremble so; she was afraid she was not a heroine after all.

She burst into a startled laugh presently, when two warm strong hands lifted her up, and brought her to the lamplight, and then she grew ashamed when Norman's keen eyes questioned her, it was so childish to laugh like that.

"Why, Barbara," he said, very gently, "why are you sitting in the dark by yourself, you little good Samaritan? You are overdone," he continued, soothingly, as Barbara, to her great confusion, began to sob at the kindness of his tone; "the accident has harassed you, and your little stock of strength is overtaxed. Don't cry, you have been a good, brave child, and done what you could; come into the parlor, Hester has some wine ready for you."

It was all over with her pleasant thoughts and heroineship. Barbara, who hated to be seen in tears, and was ready to tear her own eyes out for

shame, was obliged to cry helplessly and swallow the wine and Hester's petting together, and nestle down among the cushions where Norman had placed her, feeling, if ever there was an utter goose, it was Barbara Heathcote.

Norman presently came to her side, and wished her good night.

"You must go to bed now and have a good sleep. I have just been up to Nigel, and he is doing very fairly; and now I am off to St. Ronans," and he shook her hand, and smiled at her, and told Hester to go and put the weary child to bed.

Bab had never met with so much attention and thorough petting in her life before; she wondered what Leigh and Daddie would have said to her if they had been at home; and then she plodded upstairs after Hester, and let her help her undress, and fell asleep as she laid her head on the pillow, like the child Norman had called her. Norman meanwhile was striding down the white country road, past dim moonlight fields and glimmering hedges, full of the tangled sweetness of night, fresh cool smells of dewy herbage and faint odors of new-mown hay; all sorts of spicy night breezes curling round him, as he strode on swiftly, crunching the heather and ripe quaking grass beneath his heavy foot. A man's walk often betrays his mood: Norman's quick restless strides, his intent face looking neither to

the right or the left, neither to the starry glories above or the flickering shadows beneath, the feverish baring of his heated brow, and the impatient thud, thud, of his footsteps that seemed running a race with the night, all argued perplexed and uneasy thought. The man was taking stock, as it were, of his own sadness, weighing the past and the present in a mental balance, treading down painful memories and self-regret at every step.

Well, it had come and gone, this meeting that he had so dreaded; and he had met it with professional coolness that told nothing of the smouldering fires beneath; he had spoken easily, carelessly, with an odd assumption of indifference and kindness, courtesy manifested on a neutral ground, adducing nothing from the past, promising nothing for the future. They had met as men who had parted last as boys — Norman and Nigel, the injurer and the injured, with a great gaping wound between them of wrong suffered and pain endured, thinly covered over by the memory of old pleasures and old love.

They had quarrelled and wrangled, but they had loved each other for all that; not with the love of kindred blood only, but of warm boyish affection. Norman remembered how he had protected his cousin in many an encounter of outward life—suffering no one to oppress the frail weak boy, and he felt even now a sensation of pleasure in remembering

Nigel's devotion to him when he was once ill—the sweetmeats he had abstracted for him, the books he had read, and how the first day he got well they had had one of their greatest quarrels, brought on by his own insufferable temper.

And now they had met again with half a lifetime between them, and he had turned Nigel's senseless face to the light with a feeling, painful yet pleasurable, that his was the hand appointed to bind up his wound; he did not say this to himself in so many words, for Norman was no man of sentiment, but he felt it all tke same, while his eyes met Nigel's with such watchful gravity, and his lips uttered well-meaning professional advice, his very heart yearned over him, compassionate, strong to save. Alas! I have little hope to make you comprehend Norman Strath's character as it really was: these rugged natures, with their thousand intricacies and wonderful interior developments, which offer such tempting fields of exploration to the mental physiognomist, generally remain unvalued and unsolved enigmas to the world at large.

For human reason and human judgments are necessarily of the earth, earthly; "ye are known by your fruits," said diviner lips than ours, and to the end of time men shall judge by the deeds and not the motives, by the outward appearance and not the heart, as a pious writer has once remarked, in some

such words as these: "Ah, how many of these rejected and despised ones shall be bidden in another and purer life, where motives shall accuse or excuse our actions, and all things lie open to the judgment that cannot err, to take a higher seat and a nobler crown than ours, "justified rather than the others."

To the world in general, to his friends and patients, Norman Strath presented but one side of his character; and not even his mother, and least of all Barbara, guessed at the hidden nature of the man.

To them he appeared blameless in his integrity, whole-souled in his profession—a little restless perhaps, but still profoundly just.

His daily life was marked by rugged kindnesses and covert acts of generosity, by a pride so great, a chivalry so complete, that he would treat the pauper women at the Union with the same respect he would show to a duchess, or if this were not in his humor, a bluntness alike to both. His suspicion and contempt were easily aroused and difficult to allay, his judgments harsh, and his tongue often bitter with concentrated irony; his words stung perhaps at the very moment that his hand or purse were stretched out to relieve, and as often resulted from such strange admixture; the humble folks fully understood and appreciated him, his equals feared,

and his friends bore with his eccentricities, swallowed his satire, and loved him in spite of all.

Barbara, even though she entertained a hostile position towards him, and prided herself on her reserve and the counter-irritation which his unmeasured contempt for her exuberant fancies never failed to call forth, yet sometimes voluntarily let down her colors and went over to the enemy, touched to the heart by some act of generosity which he had endeavoured but failed to hide.

Her reasoning on such occasions was one-sided and thoroughly Barbaric; he behaved shamefully to her, no doubt, by treating her like a child, and assuming a right to lecture and depress her; she never enjoyed any of her little schemes or plans after Norman had ventilated them; but she could afford to be magnanimous and avow that she saw virtues in her enemy; after all that could be said, his bark was worse than his bite, and his mother, whose opinion of course was worth something, saw no end of goodness in him.

To-night, especially, Barbara's heart had been soft to him; he had acknowledged her genius, and she had stood by and appreciated his ready skill, and served under his orders right humbly, and, lastly, when she had behaved childishly, and expected nothing but manifest scorn, he had acted gently towards her, making allowances and comforting her by

the very kindness of his tones. No, Norman should never be her enemy again, she vowed that to herself, as she laid her weary head on the pillow, and strong in this virtuous resolution for peace and friendship, she wholly ignored the possibility of future sneers, satire, and all the strictures and advice that so galled and fretted her high spirit. But little did Barbara think, as she dealt out to Norman this tardy justice of appreciation, that the man whom she more often blamed than praised, was infinitely noble, beyond her possibility of conception, and, with all his faultiness, purely and innately good.

Why should she guess, when his mother did not, the hidden strength of a nature that was capable of deathless love, and powerful to endure the cruellest self-sacrifice, or rather that could and would suffer for the right or for the weak: that was content to move endlessly, aimlessly, in the narrow, confined orbit that chafed him with a life-long fret, but which he endured with the same passive patience with which the religious or ascetic wears his hair shirt, and carries the chain that eats into his flesh?

He was that type of man, that when the centuries struggled and fought for the truth, would have swelled the ranks that followed the Nazarene; had he lived then, he would have entered the noble army of martyrs, would have sealed his faith with his blood in the arena or at the stake; and yet he was

one who loved his life dearly, who held it as a precious pearl, to put out to the noblest merchandise.

Norman never complained that his life was different to what he hoped, that the narrow compass of a country village could not measure his ambition, or afford scope for the strength he felt in him; never repined fruitlessly that he, who was formed for nobler things, who could have achieved a success in the New World, should be set to physic village boors and old women at the union, or a few fine country ladies who had left their favorite physician in town; he never spoke of these things, he was content to let them prey upon him in secret, like the Spartan boy who let the fox gnaw his vitals; in his long lonely rides at noon, night, or early morning, he would wrestle with the thoughts and passions that oppressed him, combating them fiercely in his muscular Christianity, in words sometimes spoken aloud, sometimes uttered in the recesses of his heart—words which he had gleaned from Holy Writ, and bound about him with the threefold cord of love. "He was the only son of his mother, and she was a widow." Ah, there lay the secret of Norman's self-sacrifice, his renunciation of a hundred ambitious hopes that would have led him to toil and starve in the New World, and fight his way through obstacles of time and place, climbing painfully his way up the ladder of life—he

had but placed his foot on the lowest rung—and behold the silken cord hung round his neck, and dragged him down, and bound him, a moral Pegasus, to the plough: his widowed mother, with her broken life, her scanty means opposed to past affluence, there was his hindrance; he must stay with her, maintain her in comfort, and perhaps, who knows? restore her to something of her old position; he would not leave her to obscurity and loneliness, though she would have borne both willingly for his sake, while he worked for her elsewhere; for Norman could do nothing by halves, his renunciation must be complete, and so he buried his hopes, past and future, in the present of a country doctor's life, and so took up the burden of his days.

There was a little light dawning for him just now, a little fire whereat to warm his frozen energies, to thaw his pent-up passions; did he know it? We shall see.

This meeting with his cousin had tried him sorely; it had raked up an old grievance, a past pain. Norman was no morbid self-tormentor, loaded with scruples, dolorous with remorse; but he felt keenly that he had injured Nigel, and no one, his mother especially, guessed the measure of his regret.

It was unbounded, it was self-accusing, it was true to the moral justice of his nature; he had

tried himself at the bar of his own conscience, on the principle of every man his own absolver, himself the criminal and judge, and had found himself guilty.

True he knew, no one better, that his hand had not dealt the blow that had ended in that terrible fall, that had for so many years wrecked the health and happiness of one young life; he knew that it was the result of accident, and Nigel's persistence; but he could not forget the fierce wrestling that preceded it, the ungovernable temper that led him to attack one so much frailer and feebler than himself; he knew that his superior strength had forced Nigel to the head of the staircase, and had Nigel died from the effects of that fall, he would have branded himself as his murderer. As it was, he owned to himself that the blame was his and no other's, and it was this consciousness of his own sin that had led him to acquiesce in Lady Strath's harsh sentence that he should not see Nigel again; and though this prohibition was removed just before their departure from England, and Norman was admitted to see his cousin, the altered looks of the injured boy, and his helplessness, smote on Norman's heart so hardly that he grew dumb in his anguish—stubborn, as Lady Strath said afterwards—and could say nothing of all his sorrow; but Nigel, generous with all his faults, read the sullen

downcast looks more truly, and accepted that mute penitence, and comforted him with frank expressions of forgiveness.

"Don't look so, Norman, I would rather see you cry than look like that; we were both to blame, but I most, and my mother shall not tell every one that you pushed me down."

"I did not, I did not, Nigel," were the only words poor Norman said during the short interview that was allowed the lads. "I wish it had been I that was hurt; yes, that I do," and Nigel detected the sob in his voice.

Norman never forgot those few minutes, nor, to tell the truth, Nigel either; they felt then that they had loved each other, and regretted their want of mutual forbearance; with Norman it was a deep and abiding thing, and he registered in his young mind a boyish vow, that he had kept intact till now, that should it ever be in his power to make restitution to Nigel for his long pain, even though at the expense of his dearest happiness, he would make it at all hazards. God and, later on, one other knew how he kept that vow.

CHAPTER XI.

NORMAN FINDS A WELCOME AT ST. RONANS.

"Thine eyes' blue tenderness, thy long fair hair,
And the wan lustre of thy features caught,
From contemplation, where, serenely wrought
Seems sorrow's softness claimed from its despai
Have thrown such speaking sadness in thine a
With mines of unalloy'd and stainless thought,
I should have deem'd thee doom'd to earthly care.'

Byron.

We left Norman striding on through the moonlight, and chewing the cud of many a sweet and bitter memory, as he walked, nor did he once break off the painful thread of his thoughts till he reached the lodge gates of St. Ronans.

"You are a late visitor, doctor," said the old grey-headed lodge-keeper, one of Norman's favourite patients.

Dr. Strath merely nodded and passed on, following the windings of a carriage drive, half avenue, half shrubbery, and on one side so densely planted as to resemble the outskirts of a wood, and through the dusky shadow of which he could catch the fair

shining of a large sheet of water, known in the village as the St. Ronans' Lake. A belt of gleaming laurels and oleander led him by a sudden turning to the long terrace before the house; but he paused a moment before he ascended the broad flight of steps leading to the portico, to look out on what seemed a scene of enchantment.

For all around him lay great, still gardens, steeped in moonlight, and breathing of nothing but silence and dew, with shining walks everywhere, and glimmering statues stretching their white arms out from the dim, misty lawn: not a sound, not a movement, anywhere. Norman drew a long breath as he looked. "How dream-like and unreal everything looks!" he muttered. "I could almost imagine I was Eichendorf's Taugennichts, that Barbara is so fond of, when he wandered about into all sorts of moonlight places, and found himself entertained as the real Brautigam: it reminds me of some verses of his, which Ludwig used to spout at Heidelburg;" and he hummed—

"Es war als hätt' der Himmel
Die erde still gekürst,
Dass sie im Blüthen Schimmer
Von ihm nun träumen müsst."

"I was fond of poetry then, I remember. Humph! that's half a lifetime ago. Let's wake up the en-

chanted palace, which looks asleep, for all its lighted windows. What an illumination!—it might be a fête;" and he walked up the steps slowly, eyeing the front of the house with the air of a connoisseur, admiring its noble façade, but shrugging his shoulders slightly at the same time. He was saying to himself, "Oakleigh Cottage and St. Ronans—a marvellous affinity, surely; and the full lap and the niggard heart go together; and the earth revolves round the sun, and the moon round the earth, and, as the old wise king has it, 'There is nothing new'—'Vanitas vanitatum!'" and so Norman passed over the threshold of St. Ronans.

After that, he was profoundly calm, and the gaily dressed lacquey who answered his summons, and ushered him into the great glittering hall, looked quite astonished at the nocturnal visitor who desired him so haughtily to show him into a room, and tell his mistress that Dr. Strath must see her at once on pressing business. But, as Jeames informed his fellow-servants afterwards, "he was that grand and that ugly, that he could refuse him nothing;" and with the instinct of his order, which always detects the real gentleman in spite of the shabbiest exterior—Dr. Strath wore his surgery coat, having forgotten or not cared to change it—he at once ushered him into the drawing-room, and, with a muttered "he would tell her ladyship's maid," withdrew,

leaving him alone in the shining and splendid wilderness.

Now it so happened that Norman had an enterprising mind, and not satisfied, apparently, with the green lounges and gilt-backed chairs where he could have sat and studied attitudes in a dozen gleaming mirrors, he became curiously intent on inspecting some heavy velvet hangings drawn before some folding-doors; and with the certainly unorthodox notion that he was monarch of all he surveyed, for the present at least, he proceeded to reconnoitre hidden territories, and with the utmost coolness drew aside the curtain and peeped in.

And he saw a tiny room hidden within the other, full of green tints and shady lights, and with pink hangings which seemed to give a faint blush of color to the whole, and nestled up in a great arm-chair a little figure in white, whom Norman took at first for a child, but when he had seen the face—a very startled one now—he knew it for the face of an old friend.

"Why, Nest!" he said, advancing quickly with outstretched hands; "little Nest!" and all his kind heart shone in his eyes, "have you forgotten me? I am your old playfellow and friend, Norman."

Nest looked up at him shyly, and then fluttered towards him, and put two timid little hands in his,

and beamed up at him, blushing a little, and regarding him with odd, wistful looks, yet somewhat dubiously.

"Are you Norman?" she faltered; "dear, old Norman, who was so good to me? I do not know your face at all, you are so altered;" and she drew her hands from his,—they looked like a pair of crushed lilies in his grasp, and something glittered in her eyes and made them misty. "Ah, *bon cousin!* if you are he, you are strange to me; but I remember the past;" and then she gave him a sad little smile and took his hand again, and pressed it, and made him sit and talk to her, while all her looks and words and movements came to Norman like the chords of long-forgotten music.

"You are not changed, Nest," he said, with grave tenderness; "it is the same face, the same loving heart as ever, I am sure." And he looked her all over with the interest of one inspecting a long-lost treasure, recognising its beauties and defects, and lingering over them lovingly one by one.

She was scarcely more than a child in stature now—Barbara would have looked tall beside her; but there was something infinitely more womanly in her than in Barbara; she had the look of one who had felt her way to womanhood through long suffering, and having found it, remained patient.

To Norman's startled eyes she had seemed at first

nothing but a dazzle of white. Her dress was of shining silk, and she wore no color at all, and no ornament, save a string of pearls round her neck, with a tiny diamond cross attached to it; and her neck and arms gleamed out of her dress, thin, almost attenuated, but still so purely white that one could not find fault with them.

The face was without beauty, but, oh! so sweet and good, with its pale halo of hair that fell round it like a shadow, and which she wore loose as a child, perhaps to conceal her slight deformity.

There was little, after all, to attract notice—a painful bend or stoop, a crookedness, one shoulder higher than the other. Norman noted it all with professional eyes during the short minute that he had sat silently beside her; but she felt his scrutiny, gentle as it was, and shrank from it coloring with womanly embarrassment; a look of suffering crossed her face, and then she smiled at him as an angel might.

It was long years ago since Nest had first taken up her life-long cross, and lifted it on her drooping shoulders, and carried it meekly. It was heavy, she said to herself—very heavy; it crushed her spirit sadly, and kept it low; but crosses are not made of flowers, and "no cross, no crown," said Nest.

And so she looked out on the world with odd,

womanish eyes that had something of the saint in them, and felt wistful yearnings, divine hungers of the soul, and folded her patient hands, and said that it needs must be, for some hunger and some are satisfied, and the aggregate of human suffering is not yet filled to the brim; and wondered if all the gems in her crown were numbered—for every sorrow a gem—and what she had suffered no one knew, save God and her guardian angel.

She had been a neglected child, and Heaven knows the world of misery involved in those three words; and though time and circumstances and her own sweetness had softened her mother's heart, Nest knew it could never beat in such warm love for her as it did for Nigel, and she yearned for it as she did for personal beauty, or for all the world holds dear.

Nest prayed for beauty as passionately as ever Barbara did, and deformity was given her—slight perhaps to loving eyes, but exaggerated painfully in her own. She felt herself stamped with a peculiar loneliness, different from other girls, apart from the young, the active, and the happy, to whom she yet felt drawn with that human longing for a friend which is the truest instinct of our nature, but which her timidity forbade her to seek.

And the sad mateless feeling grew on her with the years, only tempered by her exceeding gentle-

ness. "Whom He will, and when He will," said Nest; "but it may be that my mate is with the angels," and so her sweet eyes looked heavenward and found content there.

But perhaps the greatest suffering Nest had known was the last two winters which they had spent at Naples and Vienna; for Lady Strath had declared in her careless selfishness that Nest had given way to her sickly and morbid fancies long enough, and must see a little of the world. Nest rarely complained, and never resisted her mother's will. She went, but what an ordeal it was she endured! Evening after evening, night after night, she sat in her little corner under her mother's wing, dressed as a princess, but white and trembling, and looked out upon the world—its pomp, its glitter, and its vanity—with eyes full of a woman's woe. She saw beauty there such as she had dreamed of, surrounded by adoration and worship. She would have sacrificed all her jewels to have changed places for one evening with the plainest girl there; and to have laughed as she laughed. Nobody noticed her; they passed her by with a pitying smile; what did she want there, a poor deformed girl, with her sad pale face and shadowy hair? and Nest would shrink back in her corner, looking sadder and paler as the night wore on, and on her return home pull off her jewels, not angrily,

but wearily, and kneel down at the foot of her little bed, with the tears streaming from her eyes, and stretch out her eyes in the darkness to where she could see a dim picture of a thorn-crowned head, and pray her dear Lord to comfort her, and have pity on her lonely heart—her very, very empty, lonely heart, sobbed Nest.

Ah, how many such prayers go up to the Master of years! Yea, what passionate tears, what yearnings, from those who go branded through life with some piteous deformity, some infirmity of the flesh which is their especial cross!

Is there any balm in Gilead for those who have to suffer a life-long pity or a life-long scorn—for those who are often halt and maimed in spirit as well as in flesh—fretted, and warped, and chafed by their own despair? Yea, there is comfort for these, if they bear it as a cross, and not a scourge—as a trial, and not a punishment—as a loving dispensation, and not a curse.

Oh, gird on your cross, then, weary sisters, even though you bear it after Him to the very Mount of Sorrows; though you fall under it many times, you shall rise again. "No cross, no crown." What if Nest's childish faith be true, and for every sorrow here you wear a gem hereafter? Norman guessed instinctively a little of all this when he saw the look of pain flit over Nest's face; his great man's heart

felt full of pity for her—the same sort of pity that he once felt for a poor wounded bird which lay struggling at his feet with its broken wing; he thought, if Nest were only his sister, how he would have loved and cherished her.

"Nest," he said, gently, "I am a stranger to you: you do not recognise me; you shrink away from my look."

"Nay," she said, and her face grew so calm and sweet, "I am only the silly little Nest I always was, shy, and foolish, and afraid. I shall know you soon, Norman, never fear. Your eyes have got their old trick of smiling even when you look grave, as you do now; but you have something to tell me, cousin?"

"You guess rightly; I have," returned Norman, quietly. "Have you not wondered what has become of Nigel all this time, or is it his general custom to keep out so late?"

"Mamma was just getting uneasy about him, and, to tell you the truth, so was I. Nigel has an odd trick sometimes of being absent at meal-times, and wandering about the country with his gun or sketch-book, sometimes for a whole day together without giving us warning; but mamma told him such habits would never suit English life or English climate; and, indeed, I am afraid it will be highly injurious to him, he is so delicate. You are a doctor, Norman; you will agree with us, of course?"

"Most entirely; but Nigel is not wandering about the country; he is safely housed at Dr. Heathcote's. He met with an accident—don't look so frightened, it is nothing so very alarming: he is better now."

"But what accident? You need not fear my calmness, Norman; speak out. Mamma is not here."

"Well, yes, I will speak out; but, Nest, you must be brave and quiet, for your mother's sake. Nigel was foolish enough to leap a hedge with a loaded gun; it went off, and lodged its contents in his hand, and of course, poor fellow, it is very much injured."

Nest kept quite quiet, but her eyes looked agony; Norman took her hand to reassure her, and went on. "One of Dr. Heathcote's daughters found him in this condition, and got him home somehow or other to her father's house; and as I was fortunately on the spot, no great mischief ensued, and with care and perfect quiet he will do well—at least, I hope so."

Nest gave a piteous little moan, and wrung her hands.

"Indeed, indeed, he will," pleaded Norman, "you must believe me;" but Nest shook her head.

"You don't know him—the delicacy of his constitution; he looks well and seems well, but that is nothing. The foreign doctors mamma consulted say that there is no real stamina—no strength: his heart is so weak, that any great shock, any protracted

anxiety, even of pleasure, would be too much for him. Oh, Norman," and here she sobbed, "you don't know how fearful we are of him; how we guard him from everything but his own wilfulness."

"My dear child, I do understand," said Norman, kindly. "I know Nigel's constitution well, I can read it at a glance, and I reiterate my former opinion that the injury is merely local, and that with quiet and care he will do well. You can trust me, I hope?"

"Oh, yes!" she returned, a little comforted, and looking up into the kind face that somehow always inspired confidence. "But, Norman, what shall we do? Mamma ought to be told at once; but I dread her knowing it so. She will think the worst. And, oh! she is so devoted to Nigel."

"I will tell her myself. I came for the purpose; but, Nest, where is she? This house might be an enchanted palace, it is so brilliant and silent."

"We are always quiet when Nigel is not here," sighed Nest. "Mamma is in her dressing-room with a bad headache. The servant had just told me that a gentleman was wishing to speak to her on business, when you drew back the curtain; and I told him no one could be admitted to her to-night."

"But you must contrive for me to see her," urged Norman. "Go up now, dear Nest, and tell

her that I must speak to her on business; but do not bring in Nigel's name, if you can help it. It will only flurry her, and yourself too."

Nest, perfectly trained in docility, rose at once; and Norman amused himself in her absence by walking restlessly up and down the long drawing-room, chafing at the delay, till she re-appeared and stood waiting silently for him at the door.

"Well?" he said, impatiently looking down at her flushed and discomforted face, "am I to go up?"

"Yes, if you please," said Nest, in a very low tone, as she turned and led the way.

Norman understood it all. The news of his visit had been received ungraciously. Nest had had to bear the brunt of her mother's annoyance, while he himself would be received with well-bred smiles. "Of all things, I hate a woman's duplicity," muttered Norman, between his teeth. A hard word for a little feminine deceit or false smiles; but Norman, with his stern integrity, was a very harsh-judging man. He called the shams of society lies, and stripped them of their varnished gloss when he could, laying bare the bald and barren truth in all its homely guise, calling things by their right names, never scrupling at an ugly word. So society often rose against him, and voted Dr. Strath ungentlemanly and a bore, terms at which the cynic snapped his

fingers and laughed the louder. The handsome staircase at St. Ronans, which was broad enough for six able-bodied men to walk abreast, was first broken by a noble landing-place, and then launched into two lesser flights, leading on either side to a gallery which ran round three sides of the hall, and on which opened all the sleeping-rooms of the family. Nest led the way round one half of the gallery, and tapping lightly at a red-baized door on the right, pushed it open and beckoned to Norman to enter, whereon he found himself in the most luxurious dressing-room he had ever seen.

I think Barbara would have judged Norman a most pitiless critic if she recalled his cold strictures on Lady Strath, and compared them with the handsome gentlewoman who rose from her seat as he entered, and met him with such gracious smiles; but then Dr. Strath never admired those whose conduct he condemned,—that was the uncharitableness of the man. When compelled to admit reluctantly Lady Strath's good looks, he spoke of her face as merely a fine masque without any play of feeling; and Barbara afterwards admitted he was right.

But she was very striking to strangers in her well-preserved beauty, which was certainly wonderful for her age. Her cheek was as smooth and round as ever, her broad, white forehead free from wrinkles, and her brown hair apparently unmixed with grey;

and, but for the portliness of her figure, which slightly inclined to embonpoint, no one could have believed she was in her fiftieth year.

Such was the woman who advanced with so much grace to Norman, bidding him welcome with outstretched hand and cordial smiles.

Norman responded gravely but politely, and then, refusing the seat to which she waved him, reared up his massive height against the mantel-piece, and so looked down at her from a vantage. This was a habit of Dr. Strath's when he wished to influence or awe people, whom nevertheless he kept at arm's length.

She felt the strength of his position as she looked up at him, and her tone became a little less gracious.

"Well, the boy has become the man; and what a great strong man you have grown, Norman! how proud your mother must be of you!" Norman grunted. "'Handsome is as handsome does,' as I often tell Nest. You have not inherited your mother's good looks; but what of that?"

"Or my father's either," replied Norman bluntly.

"Ah, he was a splendid man, I have heard: our children do not always take after us;" and she sighed. "Well, better late than never, Norman; and so you have treated us to a nocturnal visit. Very kind of you, I am sure."

"You have nothing to thank me for," he returned in his brusque tone. "I have only come on most unpleasant business;" and then, without any more roundabout speeches, he detailed Nigel's accident, dwelling on it certainly as lightly as he could, and giving her fully to understand that he was comfortable and well cared for. But he had not the quiet auditor he had in Nest. At the first mention of Nigel's name Lady Strath's passive face flushed with maternal interest; but as he proceeded she interrupted him with little cries of terror and love, and then turned deadly pale, and rocked herself to and fro, looking as if she were going to swoon.

Nest bent over her like a little shining angel, and hushed and soothed her; but she pushed her away, almost beside herself.

"Oh, my boy! my Nigel!" she moaned; "it will kill him. Don't speak to me, Norman: you don't know what I fear. Ring the bell, Nest. I will not wait to have the carriage out; it can follow me. Tell Stevens to bring me my cloak and hood at once."

Nest was about to obey her mother's behest, but Dr. Strath stopped her.

"Wait a moment, Nest; your mother could not have understood me. No one must see Nigel to-night."

"No one—of course not; but his mother will. You little know whom you are speaking to, Norman, when you forbid me to see my boy;" and she turned from him with a movement full of haughtiness.

"My dear madam," replied Dr. Strath in the same half-stern, half-soothing tone he had used to her all the time, "I will not answer for it if you disturb my patient to-night. I have just administered a soothing draught, and if you leave him to my care he will do well; but his nerves are sadly shaken by the shock, and the least excitement, the least anxiety on your part, might induce fever or some other ill."

"You don't know what you are talking about," she repeated angrily, fuming at the quiet decision of his tone. "You cannot know what you are about when you separate us. My boy will never sleep without his mother's kiss to-night: I must watch beside him, or he will not rest."

"Pardon me," returned Norman coolly, "he was asleep before I left him. I told him I should refuse you access till the morning, and he was quite content. He sent his love, and begged that you would remain quietly, and come to him in the morning."

"I don't believe a word of it," said Lady Strath, angrily. "Who attended to his wound?—you?" Norman bowed. "You are a young doctor," she

continued. "Would it not be better if Dr. Heathcote, or any other more experienced man, were to see him, and judge of the treatment?"

Norman bit his lip, and his blood boiled within him. She had impugned his professional skill—his whose knowledge was worth a dozen Dr. Heathcotes'.

"Any common surgeon could have done what I have for Nigel. You need not be alarmed: to-morrow he will be Dr. Heathcote's patient;" and he bowed stiffly with a superb pride, either not noticing, or pretending not to see, the extended hand. She called him back before he had reached the door, breaking into passionate tears as she did so.

"I did not mean anything unkind," she sobbed out. "Don't visit it upon my boy; if you do him good, I shall be grateful to you for ever: he was always fond of you, Norman, though you injured him."

Norman listened with blackness on his brow. "Dr. Heathcote will meet all your demands, and I have perfect faith in his good sense. If you wish for a London doctor to advise with him, you have but to give your orders."

"Yes, I know; but watch over him a little yourself. You are very clever, I hear, although young in practice; but sometimes the young doctors are cleverer than the old ones. Don't mind my ill-

humor, Norman; I am such an unhappy mother. Give my dear love to my boy, and take care of him, and God bless you for it;" and she rocked herself to and fro, moaning aloud.

"You need not be so distressed; I have perfect confidence in Dr. Heathcote," was all Norman said; and then he went out, and Nest glided after him, and stood by him silently at the hall door.

The sad little face touched him unexpressibly, and he stooped over her, looking down on her with his grave smile. The kind action unloosed her tongue.

"Oh, Norman, you must not mind anything mamma said; she is so unhappy about poor Nigel. Mothers are so jealous, and say all sorts of things; and Nigel is her idol."

The shining dress, the loose hair, the mild, good face! Norman's heart yearned over her with brotherly fondness, and he felt all his anger and pride melt away as he looked at her.

"Blessed are the peacemakers," he said softly. "Good-night, little Nest;" and he turned from her, hat in hand, and went out into the moon-lighted garden, and the dark shrubberies, and long, white country roads, and a woman's figure seemed to walk beside him unseen, and lead him like a little child.

CHAPTER XII.

BARBARA MAKES A NEW FRIEND.

"And yet, believe me, good as well as ill,
Woman's at best a contradiction still."—*Shakspeare.*

On the morning after the accident, Hester and Barbara were sitting together in the harlequin room, talking over their work in a cosy, confidential manner, while Connie, idle as usual, sat at their feet, with Ben's head upon her lap, and her large round eyes fixed on Barbara's face, interested, wrapped up in, the delights of a narrative drawn to the life.

Barbara looked a little pale,—a little subdued, perhaps; but the glories of heroineship were strong upon her this morning, and she was tasting the full flavour of a thorough feminine enjoyment, that exquisite pleasure of relating an adventure in which we—delightful nominative governing the whole sentence, verbs, adjectives, and all—have borne ourselves so bravely, that our little brazen trumpets blow themselves hoarse with their notes of triumph.

What a delight to the true woman, this revelling in the I's and We's of innocent egotism, lapping up

comparatives and superlatives by the dozen! what histrionic effects, what involuntary exaggerations, what thickly laid coloring, what lurid backgrounds, tinted fires of our own lighting! while on this fancied stage we strut out our little parts, poor spluttering geniuses, heroes and heroines in our own eyes,—"thus and thus have I done."

Barbara was enjoying these sweets of retrospection to the full; her sentences rolled over each other, eked out by Connie's little gasps and cries of wonderment; while Hester listened with perfect condescension and appreciation, annotating her remarks feelingly, and adding proper ejaculations at the right intervals, her words all the while so gentle, and her aspect so benign, that Barbara, quite intoxicated with the incense of public opinion, exerted herself to the utmost, and felt as happy as a queen.

"It is like a scene out of a story-book, Barbara. Well, and what did you do next?" cried wondering Connie. "Never mind telling us quite so much about your own feelings; that is a verb understood, you know," she continued, with a little laugh at her own cleverness. "I always skip the moral reflections in a novel."

"Yet perhaps they contain the pith of the whole," remarked Barbara, meditatively. "What is the use of writing them, if they are not to be read? No one lets a person tell a story in her own way."

"That is, because people take such a roundabout way of telling it," replied Connie, in an argumentative voice; the course of true narrative, like that of true love, being seldom destined to run smooth. They were drawing to the close now, and she was becoming aggravated at Barbara's slow meanderings. "All the books in the world might be condensed into half, if they would just tell the story and have done with it, and leave the moral till the end, like Æsop in his fables, and not introduce a sermon into every other chapter."

"I think it is you who are interrupting Barbara now," remarked Hester, gently, as she smoothed down the curls of rebellious Connie; but she was spared any further speech, for at this moment the door opened, and Lady Strath was announced.

"Lady Strath!" exclaimed Barbara and Connie, *sotto voce*, and they exchanged looks of anxiety and mutual compassion, conscious, in a moment, of print frocks and crumpled hair; but Hester, who wore a cambric with the same dignity as she would velvet, whose glossy hair was ever in order and unruffled smoothness, much to Barbara's inward and envious chagrin, merely laid down her work and advanced, with the utmost composure, to meet the stately presence rustling slowly towards her.

I ask every woman to agree with me—men, of course, would not understand—whether this did

not show a greatness of mind on Hester's part; for never had Sunningford seen such French silks, such laces, such ribbons, or smelled such sweet, languid odours as seemed to emanate from every rustling fold. Lady Strath dressed like a Parisienne, and to dress perfectly and walk gracefully were two of her objects in life; and though it may seem small and trivial to some who have not studied girl-nature successfully, it did show excellent good breeding on Hester's part, and an absolute want of vanity, that she could smile and talk so easily with this radiant stranger without a single thought as to her own appearance, or the consciousness that her cambric had paled and faded with frequent washing, and that her collar was not so snow-white as usual.

Barbara, on the other hand, felt ashamed and full of compassion, longing vainly for daintier and cleaner apparel, and then grew defiant and critical, and by dint of measuring silks and laces scornfully, and weighing mind against matter, found Barbara Heathcote, print dress and all, a thing not to be despised, and so grew haughty and at her ease in a breath; but to arrive at ease through the arguments of reason and, perhaps, a little scorn, was as far below Hester's unconscious grace as a parvenu is below a real nobleman. One of Barbara's greatest defects was, that she carried her internal consciousness and envious self-tormenting into these trifles of social

life, and grew so outwardly proud and dominant that no one would have guessed how inwardly humble she was at heart.

"My dear Miss Heathcote," said Lady Strath as she extended a gracious hand and looked admiringly at the fair face which attracted all strangers alike, "I have no words in which to thank you for your generous kindness to my poor boy; but, if the gratitude of a mother can repay you, be assured I am indebted to you for life."

"My dear Lady Strath," replied Hester, cheerfully, "you have mistaken me for my sister; it is Barbara you have to thank, not me. Let me introduce her to you. Barbara, Lady Strath wishes to speak to you."

I don't think we ought to blame Lady Strath for the too visible surprise and disappointment written on her countenance as Barbara came forward in that shy, defiant way of hers. As we have said once or twice, Barbara was no beauty, and rarely pleased at first sight. A little, brown girl, sweet and winning enough to those who loved her, but to a stranger rather insignificant-looking. She was a little pale too, and her eyes were dimmed with last night's crying; and she had run her fingers through her hair, and set it in a fever of ripples, so that she looked scared and a little wild. No wonder, then, that Lady Strath judged after the outward appear-

ance, and felt wholly disinclined to thank the little rough-looking girl; but her heart was soft and grateful to these Heathcotes who had befriended her son, and so she made an effort to overcome her stiffness, and began afresh.

"I have made a mistake, your sister tells me; and you are the good Samaritan, Miss Barbara. You are very young-looking to have rendered such efficient help. Norman tells me you acted with the greatest presence of mind. You must look upon me as your friend in future. We are very grateful to her, are we not, Nest?"

A little blue cloud that had hovered in her mother's outskirts flashed into sight at this, and the owner of a broad-brimmed hat responded timidly, "We are very grateful, mother."

Barbara's quick eyes scanned the broad-brimmed hat, blue cloud, and tiny bent figure in a moment, and then she turned to Lady Strath.

"I don't think you have much to thank me for," she blurted out with that delicious mixture of frankness and shyness with which Barbara always addressed strangers. "I did little enough, and that little very badly." With which perfectly candid remark Bab folded her hands demurely and remained silent.

"Norman told us quite a different story, did he not, Nest?" said Lady Strath, with another little

gush. "You undervalue yourself, Miss Barbara. You have done us infinitely good service."

"And we are deeply grateful," added Nest, softly.

Barbara looked at them both, and unfolded her hands. "Norman often laughs at me: perhaps he was laughing then. It is not like him to praise any one needlessly." And then she refolded her hands more virtuously than ever. She had been rejoicing in Norman's praise half the night; she had been treating Hester and Connie to a highly colored sketch of her own wonderful presence of mind; but it would not have been Barbara if she had missed an opportunity for contradiction, and something in Lady Strath's softly spoken words rang false to her sensitive ears. "She is disappointed,—it is not Hester; and I won't take her praise." That was the key-note of the whole.

Lady Strath found her a little provoking.

"Well, well! I see your modesty refuses to accept my thanks; we must try some other way. Nest, I will leave you to make acquaintance with these young ladies," and now she smiled graciously at Connie, "while I trouble Miss Heathcote to show me the way to Nigel's room;" and she turned with an air of unmistakable relief to stately Hester, standing so quietly beside her.

"My father has only just left your son. Norman

placed him under his care. He is out now, I believe; but I will send him up to you directly he returns. Connie, run to the surgery, and see if father has come in."

Connie vanished through the window, and the door closed slowly on the others. Barbara drew a long breath, and took up her work. Nest, after a moment's hesitation, drew her seat closer to her, and, untying her broad-brimmed hat, hung it loosely on her arm. The day was warm, and she looked pale and heated. The action pleased Barbara; it was unconventional and unexpected. She poised her needle for a moment in mid-air, and eyed her more benignantly, and then, refreshed apparently by her brief examination, fairly smiled.

I am beginning to be ashamed of Barbara. I would fain draw a veil over the hidden workings of my little heroine's mind, if it were only consistent with truth to do so. This machinery of human nature is so complex and difficult, one finds out secret springs at times which influence actions, and yet surprise you with their insignificance. Who, for example, would trace Barbara's smile, so so full of amity and welcome, to its right cause? In that brief moment's scrutiny she had noted the defects of Nest's figure, and the sickly plainness of a face whose only beauty was its purity and sweetness. Here was no rivalry to excite her envy, no

loveliness to fill her with chagrin and regret; instead, pleasant feelings of pity began to influence her; a warm personal yearning for that sweet, sad face filled her heart, and kindled into a smile. And Barbara's smile was like sunshine: Nest took comfort from it, and drew still nearer to her. Barbara laid down her work and smiled again. This time it acted like magic.

"What a dear house! and what a lovely garden!" began Nest, with a little eagerness, and she pointed with her thin hand to the long green aisle and smooth shadowy lawn. "What trees! what shadows! what coolness! It is better than the lawn at St. Ronans."

Barbara nodded her head, well satisfied.

"I don't believe there is another garden like it in all Sunningford; not even Hunsden Park or Briarsley. Sir William Travers's place cannot compete with it in the least, and I love it. But there's one thing that Ben and I like even better, and that's the pine-woods."

"Do you mean the plantations round St. Ronans?"

"Yes. Ben and I have been accustomed to roam about them at our own sweet will, unmolested by master or keeper. And when we heard new owners were coming to St. Ronans, we made up a very wry face between us—I can't tell you if Ben's face or mine was the longer—at the thought

that our liberty and right of wandering might be curtailed."

"There is no fear of that," interrupted Nest.

"No, not a bit. I am quite sure of it now. Since our little adventure down by the bracken path, our monopoly of the pine-woods will not be interfered with."

Nest shuddered, and then looked wistfully at Barbara.

"My gratitude must be a silent one, I suppose?" and she gave a little sigh.

"You are wrong there," returned Barbara abruptly. "You may thank me as much as you like, and I will listen to you with pleasure."

"But you would not accept mamma's thanks!" said Nest, with a little wonderment. "You contradicted her so, you would not let her speak."

"Ah, that was a different thing," observed Barbara, loftily. "I saw that she was not really grateful to me in her heart. She was sorry it was I, and not Hester, all the time. Do you think I could not see that? Not that I wanted any thanks," continued Barbara, with a little jerk and toss of her head, "or any acknowledgment for doing so simple a thing; but I wonder if the poor Jew in the parable was less grateful to the good Samaritan because he was not so handsome as the Levite who passed him by."

Nest stared at this singular application of biblical knowledge, and remained silent. Bab shook her brown mane more energetically than ever.

"It is the way of the world, I suppose. I ought not to be surprised at it," continued the young philosopher. "But let us talk of something pleasanter. How do you like Sunningford?"

Nest, who had looked a little uncomfortable during the foregoing speech, brightened up manifestly at the question.

"Oh, very much—very much indeed." Thereat Barbara eyed her curiously. "Do not you, Miss Heathcote?"

"Who, I?—I am Barbara. Yes, I like it of course, because it is my home; but I get dreadfully tired of it sometimes."

"Are you serious?"

"Of course I am. What are you looking at me for? Nest, I do believe I shall like you," she continued impulsively. "Let us be friends."

It was only one of Barbara's abrupt speeches; but Nest colored all over with shy pleasure.

"I knew I should like you the first instant," she returned, with honest simplicity; "but then I never expect any one to take notice of me, you know. I am afraid you are very clever."

"No, not very," returned Bab modestly; "but then there's no knowing what I may become. I

have a fancy that I should like to go up to London and study under one of the grand artists, only Daddie could not afford it, and Norman would laugh at me, and make himself disagreeable. I want to be an artist, dreadfully."

Nest opened her eyes wide.

"We must make a beginning, you know. I have just been taking Ben's portrait: my coloring is sadly defective, I fear. Do you draw or paint, Miss Strath?"

"No."

Barbara looked disappointed.

"Not even sketch?"

Nest shook her head. "But Nigel does. Ah, he is so clever! there is nothing he cannot do; but painting is his forte. He quite lived among the artist set at Rome, and some friends of his—men of note they were too—told mamma that Nigel really had great genius, and that, if it were not for his bad health and want of perseverance, or rather hastiness of finish, he might be a successful artist." Barbara drew a long breath, and Nest went on, "He has a beautiful studio fitted up for him at St. Ronans; he has quite a suite of apartments to himself there, the best rooms in the house; and, when he is in the humor for it, he spends half his time in this painting-room."

"And what do you do with your time?"

"Oh! I work a great deal—for the poor, I mean;

I never work for myself; and I read to Nigel while he paints,—he likes that; or to mamma when she is *ennuyée*, or has the headache; and I get up all mamma's old lace,—they say I do it better than Mrs. Stevens herself," continued Nest, with a little innocent pride; "and sometimes I dress mamma when she goes out, when Mrs. Stevens is away or unwell."

Barbara's lip curled involuntarily. "But have you no life of your own?" she asked, with a shade of pity in her voice.

"No," answered Nest, humbly; "I always seem to be a sort of pale shadow of theirs. But the worst of it is," she added sadly, "I do not feel as though I were quite necessary to either."

"Why not?" inquired Barbara, indignantly. "Are they not fond of you?"

"Oh, yes, yes," cried Nest, shrinking, nevertheless, at the question; "they are kinder to me than I deserve. But you see they hardly want me; they are all in all to each other."

"Is Nigel so attached to your mother, then?"

"Yes, and so proud of her besides; and she is devoted to him. You should hear them talk sometimes, when Nigel is in one of his moods; it is beautiful—just like a book; and he is fond of me too, calls me 'ma mie' and 'mignonne,' and all sorts of pretty names, when he is in a good

humor. But you see I am not his friend; mamma is that."

"Yes, I understand," said Barbara, venturing on a little squeeze of sympathy. She was not then the only one unappreciated at home; and Nest had not even Leigh.

"I fancy that he does not tell her all his thoughts; and sometimes they quarrel when their wills clash. Nigel is so spoiled!" continued Nest, with innocent garrulity; "he has never been crossed in anything, and he rules the house—mamma and me, and every one in it, and no one dares to oppose his authority."

"Tyrants are seldom amiable," observed Barbara, curtly.

"He is very fretful and irritable at times. It is trying to bear, of course; but we know it is from his bad health, and so we put up with it. The worst is, strangers don't like it; and Nigel is just as impatient and capricious with them as with us, and would give vent to his displeasure before a whole roomful, if he were in a bad humor. And that is what vexes mamma so; she is all for courtesy and reserve before strangers."

"I think Nigel's way the more honest," replied Barbara, abruptly; and, Hester re-entering at that moment, the conversation became more general.

CHAPTER XIII.

NIGEL TAKES UP HIS QUARTERS AT THE DOCTOR'S HOUSE.

"Beseech your majesty,
Forbear sharp speeches to her: she's a lady
So tender of rebukes, that words are strokes,
And strokes death to her."—*Shakspeare.*

THE conversation became more general, but lost much of its originality. Barbara, who had been expressing herself in a thoroughly Barbaric manner, and who had become somewhat lofty in consequence, now subsided, with a fatigued air, into private life and absolute silence, sewing at her seam demurely, with her forehead wrinkled like an old parchment. Such silence, when accompanied by due expression, is more eloquent than words. Hester felt at once that she had interrupted a pleasing dialogue, and, becoming uncomfortable, worked up a few commonplace remarks with difficulty, to which Nest chirruped a few faint answers; and it was quite a relief when Connie rushed in, breathless and rosy, with a great peacock butterfly prisoned in her hand, and

commenced chattering nineteen to the dozen. Nest was no talker; she was not one to shine in society. A few monosyllabic replies, a stammered-out question or two, was all her individuality could assert for itself. Curiosity bewildered her; brilliancy and repartee reduced her to a state of quiescence; she shrank from the clamor of tongues and laughter; a short spasm of wonder, a blank, startled look, was all she would ever vouchsafe, before she took refuge in silence that verged on tears.

How well spake the wise king, the moraliser for ages; yea, with what certain truth and wisdom he has written, "A wounded spirit who can bear?" Nest bore this wounded spirit of hers so heavily and sorely, that gentle indeed must be the hand that could touch without startling her, that could still the old aching pain and draw her at the same time. That Barbara had done so, spoke much for the bright, quaint womanliness that shone through all the bombast of eccentric girlhood. Neither her abruptness, her odd speeches, nor her curious questions repelled Nest in the least. The poor little loving heart quite sunned itself in Barbara's mirthful smiles. Like the bird to which Norman had compared her, which fluttered its broken wing with faint chirps and twitters in his warm hands, so Nest had given out to Barbara her innocent stammerings: her little flushed-up answers, her gentle gossip

and prattle, thrilled through and comforted, she hardly knew how, by a sense of appreciative kindness.

"Nest, I do believe I shall like you; let us be friends,"—that impulsive, all-girlish outbreak of Barbara's, uttered in a freak of sentiment—why, or for what purpose, the speaker hardly knew herself—would it ever be forgotten by Nest. Forgotten? —oh, no; no one could tell—Barbara least of all—how she would keep those few little words close and warm in her empty heart, hugging them up, hearing them over again and again, listening to them, feeling them, mouthing them aloud in her quiet bed, with a happy dribble of tears—"Nest, I like you; let us be friends." Two people had been kind to her in her life, and had loved her—her Aunt Lettice and Norman; but she had been separated from them for years. She had met Norman again, and found him almost a stranger; good, kind as he had always been, but still a stranger, with a grave, bearded face which filled her with astonishment, and only made her long for the boy who had looked so different. And then she had met this girl, who had saved her brother; this girl—speaking so oddly, yet with such wistful eyes, such beaming smiles; this girl, who said she liked her, who chose her for a friend. Nest called this her red-letter day, and put a new saint in her calendar, named St. Barbara of Sunningford, and commenced worshipping it with

sweet womanly idolatry, like some poor, ignorant little Papist that she was.

But she was all a-hungered for love, and would have caught at the veriest shadow that offered itself. She dwelt lonely, with her mother and brother, to whom she clung with tender ministries and persistent fondness, who only rewarded her with a capricious kindness, or worst of all with their pity.

I think Nest wronged Nigel a little in her thoughts; he was fonder of her than she gave him credit for. It is true he made her the safety-valve of his ill-humor, and teased and monopolised her in a breath; but he had a brother's love for her, for all that, and he had some sort of dim notion that she was above them both, and lived in a wondrous simplicity and purity of her own; and sometimes his heart went out to her quite pitifully, when he saw her poor little figure gliding about in the heartless crowd, a mark for the world's criticism and contempt. One day he took his mother to task about her, and they had a battle royal over her, in which Nigel vowed he would not have her dragged about at their heels, like some pale, distorted little shadow. She should have her peace undisturbed, and remain at home; and Nigel, as usual, had his way.

And Nest locked up her jewels in high content, and wore all her pretty dresses at home. But Nigel

never vaunted his victory as he might have done, and so Nest was quite ignorant that she owed her liberty to him.

The life and the gladness had quite died out of her face now, as she sat straightening her bent chest as she best could, and uttering little timid monosyllables to Hester's remarks. By-and-by, Connie's chatter filled up the lapses of silence, and Hester, full of pity, yet marvelling, almost to contempt, left off questioning the shy stranger, and gave her attention to her young sister; while Barbara, puckered and proud, gave out bright glances by the score, and drank up Nest's history with eager scrutiny.

Nest, left to herself in a relieved silence, twisted her hat nervously, shook back the showers of pale hair that incommoded her, and fell to admiring Hester with all her might.

Hester's straight profile and drooped lashes, the smooth, glossy hair and beautiful mouth, just curving into a smile at Connie's nonsense, Nest noted it all, and dwelt on every feature admiringly, and then looked from each to each of this new sisterhood, looking longest at brown, puckered Barbara.

Barbara felt the scrutiny, and, to end it, spoke sententiously, "You won't set the house on fire with your wisdom, Connie. What a pack of rubbish you are talking!"

Connie, feeling herself affronted, curled her lip at Barbara, and then screwed her little round face into as perfect a fac-simile of Barbara's eight-piled frowns as she well could. Hester and even Nest laughed.

"Oh, you absurd child," said Hester; but her voice took caressing tones. Barbara, whose eyes were fixed on her seam, neither saw nor appreciated the joke. She sewed on terribly, while Connie, full of mischief, flourished an imaginary needle, and sewed airy stitches by the score. The likeness was so complete that Hester laughed again.

"It is 'great cry, little wool,'" observed Barbara; "when I see the joke, I will laugh too," which unconscious remark reduced Connie to a state of convulsions. Barbara's provoked pout was irresistible. In another moment there would have been an explosion of a most fiery nature, but Hester held up a warning hand.

"How silly we all are. Be quiet, Connie. Barbara, don't look so cross. I think I hear Lady Strath." Nest thought she heard the same; so did Connie. Barbara, who was near a sulk, became obstinate in a moment, and argued loudly that it was Daddie.

"I never knew that Daddie rustled like that," began Connie, absurdly, when the door opening reduced her to silence.

"I told you it was Daddie," called out Barbara, triumphantly, in her loudest voice, as her father appeared with Lady Strath.

"We are both right, as it happens," returned Connie, with a little burst.

"Hush!" whispered Hester, and Dr. Heathcote looked at them both in rather displeased surprise. Such a look as that from her father would awe Barbara in her wildest and most mutinous humours. How she did punish that seam, to be sure!

Nest meanwhile rose, and looked timidly at her mother. There was a flushed, almost a vexed look on Lady Strath's face. She seemed disturbed—"put out," as the ordinary phrase is. Her well-gloved hands closed tightly over each other. Nest knew the action well. The doctor's face wore its usual pleasant smile.

"My dear madam, you must not let this trouble you. It need not cause you a moment's uneasiness; it is only a whim on my patient's part."

"It is a very troublesome whim," returned Lady Strath, in an annoyed voice, "and places me in a very awkward position. Who would have thought he would have taken such an absurd notion into his head? I never knew him set himself in such direct opposition to my will before. And you took his part, doctor;" this reproachfully.

"Pardon me, dear Lady Strath, I had no such

intention. I was quite of your opinion, but I was obliged to put a stop to the argument when I saw how he was exciting himself. Did you not notice how he flushed up in an instant?"

"Oh, he always colors up like that when he is set upon anything; but I never knew him so unreasonable before, and to his mother, too;" and Lady Strath put up her handkerchief to her eyes.

Dr. Heathcote's sympathy was not to be mistaken. Nest put a timid hand on his arm, and begged him to tell her what was amiss; his kind eyes reassured her in a minute.

"It is nothing, my dear, a mere nothing; only your mother seems to have taken it to heart. She wished the carriage to be sent for your brother to-day, or to-morrow at the latest, to take him to St. Ronans. And to-morrow Dr. Strath and I know there would not be the slightest risk in the world in so moving him. But my patient thinks he knows better than all of us, objects to the arrangement, declares the risk to be excessive, and, full of absurd theories and whims of his own, intends to remain here till he is well."

"Poor Nigel! poor, poor mamma!" broke from Nest. She understood it all in a moment. "Oh, do go and tell him, Dr. Heathcote, that he is very selfish and wrong in acting like this. Mamma will not sleep; she will be miserable, if he is away from

her, now he is ill. Oh, do go and work on his feelings: it is so cruel and wrong to mamma!"

It was clear Lady Strath was cut up in no ordinary way; her face grew excessively pale, and she sobbed quite audibly. Hester made her sit down, and fetched her some wine, and made womanly fuss over her. Dr. Heathcote smiled approbation at his daughter, signed Barbara away, and patted Nest gently on the shoulder.

"We must not be too hard on your brother while he is ill. I expect he is a spoilt child, and must be treated as such. He has talked himself into a fever; nothing that I can say will do any good. And Dr. Strath, who would have more influence, is away; besides, after all, what does it matter? Lady Strath can leave him comfortably in my care, I hope."

"It is not that," began Lady Strath, in great distress. "Miss Heathcote, you understand, I am sure. It is the thought that he prefers strangers to his own mother, who has nursed him through so many illnesses. But there, he was always capricious. Once he preferred his own valet to me, and would not let me come near him. And yet he is so good to me when he is well."

It was impossible not to pity Lady Strath: Hester did from her heart. Even Barbara grew soft.

"You must allow for the fancies of a sickly youth," began the doctor, soothingly. He was

rather scandalised himself at Nigel's cool reception of his mother, and the way in which he had set her wishes at defiance: he could not understand such pure selfishness. Leigh would never have done such a thing; but, then, no one ever did understand Nigel's eccentricities,—I don't think he did himself, quite. He afterwards owned that it was the queerest and vaguest whim kept him at Dr. Heathcote's; but he never gave it a name. Barbara was the first to guess at it.

The doctor began his soothing speech, but Lady Strath interrupted him.

"I have over-indulged him, and I must take the consequences," said she, sighing. "But look at the position in which such conduct places me. I am already indebted to you and your daughter for the care lavished on him, and now I shall be indebted tenfold; and I tell you candidly," continued Lady Strath, with a little natural dignity, "I do not care to incur such weighty obligation to strangers whom I can never hope to repay."

"Oh, we shall be repaid over and over again," replied Dr. Heathcote, gaily. "Don't be uneasy on that score. Your son will be first-rate friends with us. A new face is quite a boon in this place; and if my daughter minds a little extra trouble in the house, she is not the girl I took her for. The only fear is, Mr. Nigel will grow so weary of his

homely quarters and male attendants, that he will walk himself off one day in my absence, minus the carriage, and then you'll be blaming us all."

Lady Strath smiled faintly. "I shall send Johnson to him; and you will be obliged to put up with a great deal of my society, for I must see him every day. Nest, child, where are you? Nigel asked to see you for a minute—only for a minute, mind; and don't tell him anything to excite him, remember,—just 'How do you do?' and 'good-bye.'"

Nest felt a little flutter of strangeness as she entered the chintz room; but its old-fashioned cosiness reassured her, and she stepped quite nimbly round the great four-post bed, with its chintz canopy of sprawling convolvulus and weak-eyed daisies; with Nigel lying on a heap of pillows in the middle, with his thin, flushed face and bandaged hand, and great crimson roses nodding in at the window at him, carrying long trails of ivy after them.

Nest thought he looked very comfortable, and ceased to wonder at his whim. She liked it better than any room at St. Ronans. It was more homely—homely in its true sense. She would wish almost to lie there herself; but then Nigel would not have Barbara to wait on him: there was room for pity in that.

She flung back her long hair now, and leaned

over him, and gave him sweet, timid kisses, half fondling, half tearful, till Nigel—but not unkindly —pushed her away. "It is so hot, Nest," he said, in extenuation. Nest drew back under the shadow of the curtain, and propped herself up against the bed-post, and looked out at him with brimming eyes, but quite content. She was used to be pushed away, and his tone was very gentle; but it became less so after a minute.

"Are both the windows open? What a fever I'm in! I wish I had Johnson to fan me. Tell the madre to send the large green fan with him when he comes this afternoon. Do you hear, Nest? Well, I would not have sent for you if I had known you were going to cry and make a fuss, when you know I hate it so."

"I know you do, dear," she answered, brushing away the tears with her hand and smiling at him cheerfully,—such a wet, glittering face. "But, oh! I am so glad and so sorry, Nie! So sorry for the poor wounded hand; and so glad, so thankful, for the escape. If I were one of those poor peasant-women, I should go and burn a candle before my patron saint, out of gratitude, you know, like we saw them do at that funny little chapel in the valley. Don't you remember, dear?" This was how Nest carried out the "How do you do, and good-bye" style of conversation inculcated by her mother.

"Remember! of course I do. What queer ideas you have, Nest. Well, how do you like the Miss Heathcotes? Have you made friends with them yet? One of them, I saw last night, is a very handsome woman. She lighted us when Norman was helping me upstairs, and the candle shone full on her face. For all my faintness, Nest, I could not help thinking I should like her to sit to me for a Madonna." His face looked quite eager as he spoke.

"You never forget you are an artist, Nigel."

Nigel turned away from the implied flattery. "I should like to have a good look at her by daylight. What sort of a complexion has she?"

"I don't know," said Nest, timidly; "but she is very, very handsome, Nie; and mamma seemed to admire her too."

"More than she did the other one, then, 'the little brown girl,' as she called her. Well, she is no beauty, certainly. How fares the little Samaritan?"

That name seemed to cling to Barbara.

"I like her face better than Miss Heathcote's," maintained Nest, staunchly, quite ignoring the question. "It is not pretty, but it changes so. Miss Heathcote's is very handsome, but it is always the same."

Nigel looked at her with superb disdain, and fairly laughed.

"What an idea, Nest! Why the Samaritan

was quite a caricature, as far as I could judge. When she came up to me at the stile, I declare I thought for the first minute it was a rough-headed child with an old face. For all the world, it reminded me of nothing but a bright-eyed bird caught in a furze-bush."

Nest stood and wondered. "What a pretty simile; but you are so clever, Nie!"

"I did not mean it to be pretty," he returned, mollified by the compliment, in spite of her bad taste. "Still, it is not fair to criticise in this case. 'Handsome is as handsome does.' And she did me a good turn, out and out, this Miss Barbara. Barbara, too. What an ugly name!"

"Connie—that's the youngest sister, such a pretty little thing—calls her 'Bab.'"

"Bab! Well, that's good: curtly euphonious. Bab, Baby, Babchen, Babette, Barbaretta. What a host of names one could concoct out of that mouthful of a word 'Bab.' Well, Barbara for me."

Nest wondered a little more, and then grew red at the notion that Nigel was laughing at her favorite.

"Oh, Nigel, I do assure you she is the dearest, brightest little creature in the world, and talks, oh! so beautifully!"

"Really, you don't say so! Well, give my love to her—my kind regards to the young one, and my

compliments, my very respectful compliments, to Miss Heathcote. Mind, my love to the Samaritan."

"Indeed, I shall do nothing of the kind, Nigel. I wish you would not talk so; some one will certainly overhear your nonsense."

"Nest!" called out a shrill little voice through the keyhole; "Nest Strath, you are wanted."

The brother and sister interchanged looks of mock dismay. "The Samaritan, by all that's good! Talk of the, &c. Humph! it is a young lady in question, so I must not finish my sentence."

"Nest Strath!" the shrill voice waxed impatient, and Nest darted to the door and opened it. There stood Barbara, rosy and mischievous, her hair looking as though a stiff breeze had passed through it since they last met. "Oh, you are wanted, please," said Bab, as demure as any kitten.

"Tell mamma I am coming. I will just bid Nigel good-bye; but you startled us so, calling through the keyhole. I only hope you did not hear any of our nonsense."

"Of course not," cried an indignant voice from the bed. Barbara turned rosier than ever, and fairly danced down the passage with a little burst of laughter; and what she said to herself was, "Well, Barbara for me; give my love to the Samaritan," those being the two sentences that reached her

before she covered up her ears and whistled through the keyhole.

Nest bade a long, lingering good-bye, tied on her straw hat, and came into the harlequin room her old subdued self again, only she looked round wistfully for Barbara.

But Barbara had no look for her. She was at her seam again, sewing away for the dear life. For quicker despatch of business, she had even laid aside elegance, and had pinned the work to her knee; her face was more puckered up than ever, and her eyes screwed and fixed on the square inch before her. Lady Strath wished her a most gracious good-bye, and Barbara rose to respond to it. Hester was scandalised at seeing her drag unseemly lengths of calico half across the room. Connie gave a titter. Barbara's serenity remained unimpaired.

"Good-bye, Lady Strath: you quite overwhelm me with your thanks. Good-bye, Nest;" here Nest kissed her cheek shyly. "Connie, open the door for Lady Strath." Hester moved stiffly across the room; but, happening to look round for a moment with displeased eyes, she saw Barbara and her work, a confused white bundle, on the floor—a bundle which rocked itself mid little bursts of laughter—"Give my love to the Samaritan."

CHAPTER XIV.

NEST'S SERMON.

"For me, my heart that erst did go
Most like a tired child at a show,
That sees through tears the mummers leap,
Would now its wearied vision close,
Would, childlike, on His love repose,
'Who giveth His belovéd sleep.'"—*E. B. Browning.*

NEARLY a week passed before Nigel Strath consented to make his appearance downstairs. During all that time he had set his mother and doctors at defiance, and, in spite of disparity of numbers and an overwhelming show of reason on the one side, maintained his position by the mere force of will. In vain his mother coaxed and entreated, Dr. Heathcote argued, and Norman stormed; Nigel gave out that he was seriously ill, and that no English doctor understood his case—had a headache one day, faintness the next, and a feverish cold the third; harassed his nurses for fresh remedies, or tried some of his own; bewildered his valet by the multiplicity of symptoms engendered every morning, and all at

once, when Dr. Heathcote was really afraid that there must be some serious mischief at work, declared himself well, and, though he had never looked so ill since the first evening of his accident, announced his intention of evacuating his sick-room for the rest of the day. Norman shrugged his shoulders when Johnson told him, and made a great face of disgust. He had long ceased arguing with Nigel; but as soon as he found out that sheer obstinacy and caprice influenced the young hypochondriac, and perhaps the desire to exercise his will over a strange household, he flatly refused to enter his cousin's room again under any pretext whatever; and as Nigel found his company indispensable, perhaps this stringent treatment had more to do with overcoming his sick fancies than any one guessed, though he kept himself shut up on principle for a day or two longer.

When an irresistible body meets an impenetrable body, what is the result? Have any of the old philosophers solved this problem? I am somewhat reminded of this singular proposition—not in Euclid, however—when I speak of Norman and Nigel's clash of wills,—wills, the one reasonable, powerful for good, the other merely actuated by a momentary impulse clutched fast by a masterful hand; both powerful, dominant, and loath to yield; natures attracted and drawn to each other, yet better, far

better, apart, since in their strange twinship of taste and feeling each might desire the same thing. And who the victor then?

Norman was quite aware why Nigel pined and suffocated in his hot room some thirty-six hours after he was quite ready to seek cooler regions elsewhere. Norman was a bit of a philosopher in his way, as well as a cynic. He made up queer faces to himself in the surgery. Barbara coming in once or twice was reminded of the nodding mandarin in her den upstairs, with the grotesque little idol that leered beside it. She thought Norman grew uglier every day, but he grimaced worse than ever when her back was turned.

It was wonderful how Nigel in his sick-room ruled the household. Hester grew quite humble in her housewifery, and she and Susanna the cook, who were always at daggers drawn in matters of the hearth and spit, ceased rivalry, and united in efforts to outshine themselves. Many were the dainty little dishes the young mistress compounded with her own fair hands, which Nigel as often as not sent down by Johnson, with his respectful compliments to Miss Heathcote and would she kindly see that his meals were better dressed. Hester used to get red and pale over these messages, and Susanna tried hard not to look pleased. Sometimes the joint efforts of both produced better results, and Hester

waxed bland in her triumph. Her great point was to keep the house quiet, which with uncarpeted stairs and slamming doors was rather a difficulty. Leigh used to take off his boots and creep about with stockinged feet, out of honour to the invisible guest; Hester drew her dress round her; and Connie and the housemaid gave laborious creaks, with hushed breath and lowered heads; Barbara alone turned restive, ignored headaches, scoffed at the idea of nerves, and scuttled up and down stairs twenty times a day, calling to Ben, and whistling her loudest; but, strange to say, Nigel, who declared a footstep jarred on him, never complained or remonstrated, and only smiled his queer half-smile when the whistle invaded his silence.

"I wonder who the bird is that twitters so loudly in the early morning," he said once, as he lay with half-shut eyes on the couch; and Nest, who was sitting by him, answered, with a little suppressed fun—

"The same that was caught in the furze bush, Nie;" and then they both burst into a laugh, much to Lady Strath's surprise.

Nest had long delicious talks with Barbara in the little summer-house or under the big walnut-tree; sometimes they chatted for hours; they were growing fast friends in their mutual interchange of thought and feeling, and Nest began to think

Barbara the noblest creature in the world. She used to tell Nigel so, and prattle to him about their talks together, much to his amusement.

Nest had seen her Aunt Lettice the day after they had been at Heathcote House. Her mother called at Oakleigh Cottage, and took Nest with her; but it was a cold, uncomfortable sort of visit. Her mother had been very gracious, but Aunt Lettice looked embarrassed and out of spirits; and what made matters worse was, that Norman had stood by all the time, frowning and ill at ease. Nest had never seen him look so little to advantage.

It was a miserable failure of a visit, and Nest had a good cry over it that night; but two or three days afterwards she and Barbara went to spend a long afternoon, and Nest had felt in paradise; for all the coldness had vanished out of Aunt Lettice's face, and she had taken her in her arms and wept over her; and Nest had shed happy tears in her old place, and afterwards they had a long, long talk of past days. Barbara felt a little jealous that evening; it was not quite pleasant to see Nest's fair head resting where hers loved to lie. She said over and over to herself that Mrs. Strath was thinking of her dead Lily, and that of course her brother's child must be closer to her than she was; but it would not do; her eyes grew quite large and dark with her pain, and by-and-by she

said quite quietly, "My place is taken: I am thinking you do not want Barbara now."

Nest uttered a little exclamation, and Mrs. Strath turned round; but her jesting smile was gone in a moment, when she saw the girl's face; she only squeezed it lovingly between her hands.

"Not want my little Barbara—my adopted child! What! jealous, darling? Lie there, twin daughters;" and Mrs. Strath drew Bab's brown head close to Nest. Norman, entering at this moment, paused to look at the unwonted sight.

"Your arms are full to-night, mother," he said, smiling, and he reached his hand to Barbara.

Barbara sat up, and laughed the tears into her eyes. "If you are my adopted mother, Mrs. Strath, Norman must be my brother," she said, lightly.

Norman dropped her hand, and turned away; and Barbara remembered afterwards that he never spoke to her during the remainder of the evening.

Nest spoke to Barbara once about her deformity. Barbara never forgot that talk. It was one Sunday afternoon. Bab had played the truant from church, she was going down to her cathedral in the fir-woods, she said; and she questioned Nest's face with wistful eyes; Nest, who had a headache, nodded, half smiling and half sad; and so they went off together, Ben, as usual, accompanying them.

There was a low green hollow just on the outskirts of the plantation, by the bracken path, which was Barbara's favourite resort. She usually called it the green nest; but to-day it was the porch, and she pointed out to Nest the long dusky aisles of the firs, full of golden light, and asked whether she did not like it better than the red-baized family pew in the village church.

"Is not everything perfect?" she continued, eagerly. "We have our choristers, only they are singing in the distance; and we do not want for incense—just smell the faint aromatic perfume, the sunshine seems to wave it in golden censers—to us sweeter far, I am sure, than in any of the old cathedrals you describe."

"It is very sweet," said Nest, dreamily, and she smiled a little, as she always did at Barbara's fantastic ideas; but she said softly to herself that it was very beautiful too, and then they fell to talking, by a natural transition of ideas, about the glorious ritual of the unseen Temple where Nest hoped to worship by-and-by. Barbara never knew why she talked as she did that afternoon; she said afterwards that the incense of the pines had got into her head, and made it misty with far-away images. But she did not talk much; she listened to Nest, and, as she told Leigh, Nest talked and looked like a little white angel that had strayed away and lost its

wings, and went wandering up and down the earth, seeking them vainly, that she might fly away.

"And where are your wings, Barbara?" Leigh asked, jestingly.

And Barbara answered thoughtfully, "I've got a pair of eagle's plumes somewhere, and some day I mean to have a look at the sun;" but, then, no one understood what Barbara meant by her queer sayings.

Nest went wandering up and down the white-robed multitude that no one can number, but presently she came down to earth again. Barbara had said a word that jarred upon her. There was a little discord somewhere, a vague question or two, a fatigued sigh, and Bab's eagle plumes were trailing in the dust.

"How can you talk so?—you have never been there. I cannot follow you so high."

There were long trails of green mist round them now, and down one dim aisle a wondrous altar-light was kindled, flaming blood-red in the distance; thin shadows beset it almost like waiting ministers; and then Nest spoke on in a low voice, and told Barbara all her heart.

She spoke of an empty and wasted life, yet without a word of reproach to the living. She unfolded her reserve; she spoke of her deformity as her cross, and of the bruised and heavy heart that

carried it, lamenting over herself as one ordained to suffer. Barbara's soft heart grew tender and pitiful in a moment.

"Oh, Nest!" she cried, "how can you bear it? How can you—how can you?"

"I could not, dear, in my own strength; I am too weak and timid for that. Ah, I have suffered so! But He is merciful, Barbara; 'for so He giveth His beloved sleep.' Do you know those words? I often whisper them to myself; they bear a different meaning to me, I think, than they do to others."

"How do you mean?" asked Barbara, in an awe-struck tone. This was not like cant at all; but somehow it oppressed her terribly.

"I mean, He gives us sleep—sleep of the mind in our pain sometimes—when we are mad with our desolation. Ah! such desolation, Barbara, as, thank Heaven, you will never know. When we go down into the wilderness after Him, as it were, and all the thorns wound us and make us bleed, He just takes us up and cradles us in His arms, and lulls and deadens the pain, as a mother cradles her sick child. We cease to weep; we at times cease to suffer. We are folded into rest, like tired children with the tear-stains on their faces. Ah, yes, indeed; 'for so He giveth His beloved sleep.' Do you never feel this, Barbara?" and the pure brightness of her face was like nothing Barbara

had ever seen. She leaned towards her now, too moved to speak.

Nest went on in the same subdued tone—

"When I am very, very unhappy—when I have been out, you know, in the great glittering crowd," —here Barbara saw her shudder—"when the room has felt all eyes, and every voice has seemed full of jeering pity, 'Look at the poor hunchback girl! how well her brave fineries become her!—jewels and deformity together!' Don't look so sorry, Barbara. I have heard that speech over and over again."

"You are not hunchbacked, Nest," cried Barbara indignantly. "You are hardly deformed. No one who loved you would find out much amiss; Norman has said so, and Hester too." And Barbara held out her arms, and made little loving plaint over her.

"How you comfort me!" said Nest, drying her eyes; "but I must not believe you. I cannot straighten my poor back or chest, Barbara; and not even my long hair can prevent your seeing what a crooked little thing I am."

"You are beautiful to me," returned Barbara, lying tenderly, as a true woman will. "Nor is it only my partiality; for Geoffrey told me how sweet and gentle he thought you."

The sensitive color flitted over Nest's face, and then it wore a touchingly humble look. Again

Barbara watched her in grieved silence, then she took to playing with the long curls, and by-and-by she said—

"What is it you do when you are very unhappy, Nest? I interrupted you as usual."

"I had forgotten what I said. I was only just going to add, I believe, that when the bitterness and pain are too heavy for me to bear—to bear with my own strength, I mean—I just kneel down and tell Him all."

"Him, Nest? Who do you mean?" asked Barbara, doubtfully, and then she grew ashamed of her question.

"Who do I mean? Why our dear Lord, to be sure. The only Friend who is never tired of listening to us. And sometimes, when I am kneeling for a long time in the darkness, and still the pain and the bitterness won't pass for the surge of impatient thoughts, I fancy—but I am wearying you, Barbara; I perplex you?"

"You perplex me, certainly; but go on. What do you fancy?"

"That I see Him sometimes stealing towards me in the darkness"—and here Nest's voice grew low and awe-struck—"with a pale halo round Him, just as you see in the old pictures, the dim outline of the cross in His arms; and, oh! sometimes there is blood and tears on His face."

"You must be dreaming," said Barbara, startled, and moving uneasily in her place. Nest kept her eyes fixed on the burning altar-fires, and went on—

"It is only fancy, you know; but sometimes I dream it, and then it is so vivid and so true. He never speaks, not even in my dreams; but He looks—just as I should fancy he looked at Peter, and holds His cross towards me—holds it even before me."

"Well?" said Barbara, still doubtfully.

"Don't you see? it is such a mute, beautiful reproach. I have laid down my cross, as it were, and am shuddering and weeping over it—spurning it from me with bitter thoughts, and He died on His, Barbara."

"I know," she answered, and she bent down her head upon her knees, in her old way, to hide her face. These simple words of Nest's seemed to hurt and pain her like that stroke of the two-edged sword they read about in church. This girl, so simple, so far below her in intellect, in strength, and even in power, seemed as far removed above her now as if she were in verity the white-winged angel to which Barbara had compared her.

And the green mist turned pearly white, and clung round the tree-stems; and the fires burned luridly, and scattered crimson embers here and

there. Nest sat with hands folded on her white dress, and her hair fell like a shadow behind her. Neither spoke for a long time, till Barbara raised her flushed face, and asked abruptly—

"Where did you learn all this?"

"Where did I learn all this? Who taught me, you mean."

"Yes, yes," answered Barbara, impatiently. "I suppose you had a good clergyman?"

"I don't know what you call good. I suppose we had before we left England, but I don't know much about them. Old Mr. Delamere, who prepared me for confirmation, was the only one who spoke to me, and he only heard me my Catechism."

"I dare say not," answered Barbara, with a curled lip. "What's your name, N. or M., &c."

"He explained little bits out of it to me, but he did not do much for me. I am afraid I shall shock you dreadfully, Barbara; for the person who helped me most was a Roman Catholic priest."

Barbara sat up straight. All the rigid virtue of thorough-going Protestantism, eked out by Puritan censure, sat throned on her frowning brow and closely locked mouth. This girl, who knew nothing of religion but its name—to whom the Church was anything but a nursing mother, and

who droned out weary Sundays, mouthing words without prayer—looked down indignantly on the other, who had gotten her sweet piety, so she owned, from a Roman priest.

"I don't understand you, Nest," she said, coldly.

Nest could not forbear a little laugh. "There, I said you would be dreadfully shocked. How disdainful you look, Barbara; but you should never judge without hearing. I will tell you all about it, but you must not let any one else know."

"I am not given to chattering people's secrets," returned Barbara, stiffly; "but I do not care to hear about this. I own, you disappoint me, Nest." Barbara's back and chest would have done honour to years of back-board. Some people's virtue is always straight-backed. Nest gave another soft little laugh, as she laid her hands on Barbara's mouth; but she flushed up a little too.

"You know we were on the Continent a great many years, and Sundays abroad are great mistakes, I find. Sometimes we attended service at the English Embassy; sometimes we went to Lutheran and French Protestant churches; sometimes we were in little out-of-the-way villages, without any other places of worship than the Roman Catholic chapels. These Sundays were very dreary days to me. Mamma and Nigel used to stop at home and read to each other; but sometimes I

wandered about the village, and strayed into the different chapels, just out of curiosity, you know. There was one little sea-side village in the south of France where we stayed some weeks, Pierre-du-Point it was called, and I took a great fancy to the chapel there. It was a little fisherman's chapel, built upon a cliff, and dedicated to Our Lady of the Bleeding Heart." (Barbara's look of magnificent astonishment was a thing to see; but Nest did not notice it.) "I used to stroll up there on Sunday. It was such a pretty sight to see the women, in their clean caps and gaily coloured kerchiefs, and long gold ear-rings, clambering up the cliffs, and all turning into the dark little chapel. I used to turn in too sometimes, and wander about, looking at the pictures, and watching the women kneeling at the gaudy shrines. They used to bring all sorts of strange offerings in their hands, to propitiate their patron saints."

"And you patronised these idolaters; you stood and looked at them. For shame, Nest."

"I looked at them, certainly; but it was no shame. They knew no better, poor things; and there was one woman I used to notice, whose husband was wrecked some time afterwards, and whose body was washed ashore one terrible night. She would go and cry before one special shrine for hours, it seemed to me, with her lips just moving,

and the tears streaming down her coarse, weather-beaten face; and when she had been kneeling a long, long time, such a happy, bright look used to come over her; and once I heard her say as she rose, 'Oh, the Blessed Mother! I know Jacques will return safely.' Don't look such unutterable things, Barbara; it was her religion, you know. And after all the Blessed Mother did not help her, for Jacques was drowned, and came to shore with his face so battered and bruised that she could hardly recognise him."

Barbara motioned her to go on.

"But there was another woman I was far more interested in—a little gouvernante from a neighbouring town, who had lost father and mother, and who had brought down her dying sister for the benefit of the sea air. They lodged at a little white cottage under the cliff. She used to come every day toiling through the hot sun up the steep cliff, to kneel before the rough crucifix, and say her prayers. I was more interested in her, because it seemed to me that her prayers were less likely to be wasted; but I wondered at her too. One day I was feeling very sad, and I sat down to rest on one of the wooden chairs in the cool porch and watched her. I felt inclined to kneel down and pray too. The tears were just coming when I felt some one stop beside me, and I looked up and saw an old grey-haired

priest I had often noticed, whose eyes rested on me with a most benignant expression. On seeing my emotion, he sat down beside me. 'Thou weepest, my child,' he said, in French; 'and yet the Mother of Sorrows waits to comfort thee.' His words jarred on me. 'I am a Protestant, father,' I interposed, quickly—'what you call a heretic. That girl who has the dying sister, and prays so long before the crucifix, is she praying to the painted wood to save her sister?' The doubt had been in my mind all day.

"'Thou speakest the language of all Protestants, my child,' he replied, smiling, yet looking a little distressed, I thought; 'but you treat my poor Annette as though she were a heathen, and not a good Catholic. Lookest thou, Daughter, Annette worships the Unseen—the Crucified, whose semblance is before her; and she looks at it lovingly, for it is the likeness, as it were, of her Beloved. It fixes and raises her thoughts: they cannot wander. Look how she embraces and covers the pierced feet with her tears! If thou couldst look into her heart, ma petite, thou wouldst see she was far away. She imagines the supper-room—herself the Magdalene.' I drew a little closer to the good priest. 'Father, if I could feel as she does, though I be a Protestant! I do not love: all my life long I have fought with shadows.'"

Barbara caught her breath. "Did you say that, Nest?"

"Aye, I did; and it went up like a bitter cry from my heart. He was a good man. He understood me, Roman priest as he was. He took my trembling hand: he led me straight to the Crucified."

"Impossible!" muttered Barbara.

"Why impossible? I will not deny that he said much of which you might disapprove; but I knew enough of the errors of Rome to weed it out. During the two long talks I had with him, he neither shook my faith in my own Church nor forced my reason blindfold. He was a simple curé—a faithful priest who loved his Master; and so he took the poor little heretic to Him, and left me to His teaching. I think, perhaps, if I had remained longer, he would have tried the effect of argument; but, as it was, he knew I was to leave in the next day or two, and so he was content to soothe my grief in the only way he could. There, leave off frowning, Barbara. See, all your altar-fires are out, and nothing but grey shadows round us. Hester will be wondering what has become of you; and it is time, too, for me to go home to St. Ronans."

Barbara rose stiffly, and shook herself from head to foot, like a half-drowned terrier, and then she faced about steadily.

"You are not really shocked, Barbara?"

"No, not now; but I feel—I cannot tell you how. You have made me ache all over."

Nest went close to her, and took her hand; and what she whispered in the twilight was this:—

"I hope that you may never be comfortable, never cease from that ache again, till God's dear truth comforts you."

"Thank you," said Barbara, half touched, half proud; and then she turned away. But all down the bracken path, all through the long garden way, for many a day and many a long silent night, Nest's words came back to her; she felt them burn into heart and memory, and fought against them, and knew in the deepest depths of her heart that they were true, and that she, like her friend, should also struggle to the light through the long dark of pain.

CHAPTER XV.

WHEREIN NIGEL TURNS CRITIC.

"Better far pursue a frivolous trade by serious means,
Than a sublime art frivolously.
You
Choose nobler work than either, O moist eye,
And hurrying lips, and heaving heart?"

Aurora Leigh.

BARBARA had rather a surprise the next day.

She had been gathering flowers in the front garden, and had filled her straw hat and apron quite full, and was just stepping through the low French window into the harlequin room to sort and arrange them at leisure, when she found herself fairly barricaded out in the most unexpected way; for the old-fashioned couch, which usually stood in a recess, was lumbering its unwieldy length right across the open window, and on its heap of tempting cushions lay her old acquaintance, St. Ronans, fast asleep.

The other window was shut. It seemed a pity to disturb him, and it was very hot out there in the sun; so Bab sat down on the terrace, just

underneath the shadow of the eaves, and began staring at him with all her might. He was lying in an easy, boyish attitude, one arm under his head and his bandaged hand laid carefully on his breast; his light hair clung damply round his temples, and his face looked rather too thin and worn for so young a man; but it was a beautiful face for all that—almost faultless as regards features; and so Barbara looked and admired, and then fell to sorting and tying up her flowers—a breast-knot for herself, a garland for Ben, and sundry dainty bouquets for the Dresden vases—perfectly ignorant all the time that her cool survey had been instinctively felt, and was being now repaid with interest.

St. Ronans was not asleep; he was only in that torpid semi-somnolent state into which people often fall in their weakness. Barbara's little quick-caught breath of surprise, as she peeped over his couch, had fully roused him; and though he still lay with closed eyelids, he had felt her scrutiny all the time, and knew by a sudden intuition it was Barbara; and as soon as she busied herself over her flowers, he raised himself up on his elbow and quietly inspected her.

And he might have had something worse to look at, this bright summer morning. Bab was looking her best to-day; she wore her little nun's dress of soft clinging grey, with just a blue knot to redeem

sameness, and her brown hair rippled over her forehead, and then was tucked back behind her ears. Her head looked as soft and downy as the head of a little bird, and the illusion was helped out yet more perfectly by the bright glancing eyes and the little hands pecking hither and thither among her many-colored treasures.

And the grey dress, and the blue ribbons, the crimson roses heaped upon her lap, and the downcast girlish face, made up a bright picture together, the whole set in a background of green grass and golden sunshine. Nigel took it all in with his keen artist eyes, and then he yawned and stretched himself; and finding this did not attract her notice, he coughed faintly and shifted his position. Barbara looked up, not a bit startled, and nodded to him. Nigel stretched out his hand with a smile.

"I hope you are really better, St. Ronans," said Barbara, with a cordial grasp. "You have been a long time upstairs, have you not?"

Nigel dropped her hand. "What do you call me St. Ronans for?" he asked, in a tone of simple astonishment.

Barbara reddened all over: the word had escaped her quite unconsciously. It was too late to retract now; besides, Barbara never retracted, on principle. "When you say a wrong thing, stick to it," was her motto; so, instead of backing out of her

mistake as well as she could, she stammered out, truthfully,

"I call you St. Ronans because it is the name of your house. There is nothing disrespectful in that, I hope."

"Not a bit," returned Nigel, gravely; but his eyes had an odd twinkle in them. "It is only rather original."

"But very pretty," pleaded Barbara, still as red as a peony. "Not more so than Nigel Strath, certainly; but, somehow, I called you so the first evening we met, and so I got into the habit. Nest likes it. Besides," she continued, with a little laugh, "it is hardly worse than your calling me 'the Samaritan.'"

Nigel colored, and the queer half-smile flitted over his face. "Some one has been telling tales, Miss Barbara, unless"—with a quick, penetrating glance—"you found the keyhole attractive."

Bab was in a dilemma again; but this time she hobbled out of it as fast as she could.

"I could not help hearing it, you spoke so loud. I covered up my ears; I did indeed, St.-Strath."

Nigel found his names irresistible, and burst into a weak laugh. Barbara blushed again, and looked foolish.

"Capital! I am canonised now. Oh! how I wish Norman had heard it. No, no, stick to the

old soubriquet—it is vastly original; and I will consent to drop 'the Samaritan,' on one condition."

"What is that?" asked Bab, still very much ashamed of herself.

"That I may call you Barbara."

Barbara hesitated. She did not care herself, and Nigel was as unconventual as she was; but what would Hester say?—Hester, who was always warning her against any familiarity with strange young men. Barbara pondered the question gravely in a little womanish way that made Nigel smile.

"We are a sort of connection," she said, at last, wrinkling her eyebrows at him. "Nest is my friend, and Mrs. Strath is my adopted mother; and you—I don't quite know how I am related to you."

"That is because you don't trace far enough back. If you look at our mutual genealogy from Eve, you will find out that we are certainly distant cousins, I assure you," he continued, gravely. But Barbara, who had been listening with wide-open eyes, shook her head fiercely at him, and told him not to talk so absurdly.

Nigel laughed and looked very penitent, and then he asked her to shake up his hot pillows for him, and give him some cooling drink; and when she had sat down again, he began in quite an altered voice—

"Do you know, I have been wishing to see you

several times since I have been upstairs. You may smile at my calling you the little Samaritan; but I have never been able to thank you for what you did for me that night. I am afraid I was dreadfully rude and petulant."

"No, not very," answered Barbara, candidly. "As I told your mother, I deserve no thanks; for I did very little, and that little badly."

"There I beg to differ from you entirely. How do you get on with my mother, Barbara?"

The cool manner in which he brought out her name, and the look with which he accompanied it, made Barbara hot all over. She quite tingled down to her finger-ends. She grew rather frightened too, and then injured. "Every one treats me as a child," she thought. "I suppose it is true what Hester says, and I have no dignity." She did not know that Nigel was amused and charmed with the delicious, fresh, little piece of originality, who talked and looked so quaintly. To do him justice, he had no idea of her real age. She seemed little more than a child to him; and, after all, few people treated Bab as they did Hester.

The question was an awkward one, especially as Barbara never compromised truth—she felt it so.

"I don't think that question quite fair," said Barbara, honestly. "I have seen Lady Strath

several times, but have scarcely exchanged a word with her; she seems more taken up with Hester."

"Hester—that is Miss Heathcote, I suppose; my mother admires her greatly, I know. I understand your reticencé," he continued, slowly, "and I confess it disappoints me: everyone gets on with my mother."

"No, not every one; Mrs. Strath does not," exclaimed Barbara, and then could have bitten out her tongue for her impudence. Nigel looked at her sharply, but remained silent; a cloud gathered on his brow.

Barbara saw he was displeased; the old proud look came back to his face, all the wonderful geniality had disappeared: nothing wounded Nigel more than to doubt his mother. Bab guessed instinctively at this feeling; she was truly sorry for it, and, as a sort of amends, she took up a great crimson rose, and pushed it timidly into his hand; a brown bee followed it, and buzzed round him; the action was simple and childlike, and Nigel's cloud lifted a little.

"What a wholesale slaughter of the innocents! How could you have the heart to behead all these splendid roses?"

Barbara was nibbling at a little bit of grass; she left off, and answered him—

"There are hundreds more in the garden, and

hundreds climbing up the house among the ivy. Leigh must mount the ladder for me to-day, and gather a few handfulls."

"Pray don't touch that beautiful spray that droops in at my window," he implored, in genuine alarm. "Every morning when I wake they seem to nod at me so friendly, with their pink dewy cheeks, and they bring long trails of ivy after them till my window is quite framed with young tendrils."

"Leigh says we ought to call the house the greenery; it looks like a sweep on May-day, so dusty and so green."

"And who is Leigh, if I may ask?"

"Leigh is my great big brother—ah, such a handsome fellow; he is tutor to Sir William Travers's only son."

"Is he a dark, gipsy-looking fellow, wearing a grey tweed suit?"

"Yes; have you seen him, and when and where?" asked Barbara, eagerly.

Nigel looked amused at her sudden animation.

"I think I must have seen him pass the St. Ronans plantations once or twice; he was standing in the bracken path, I remember, one morning, talking very earnestly to a young woman in a straw hat. I confess I had the curiosity to pass them, though they were so deep in conversation that they did not perceive me. He was a very handsome fellow,

as I said; but it was the woman who struck me most; she had one of the most attractive faces I have ever seen—very pale, though." Barbara started. "Is she a friend of yours?" he went on, inquisitively; "yet I should hardly think so, for she wore a common print dress, and looked like a respectable sempstress. I think she was asking him the way," he continued, carelessly, but with a furtive glance at Barbara.

"Oh, I know who you mean now," she answered, pretending not to see the look; "it must have been Ruth Canham, the miller's sister, and our village schoolmistress; she is a friend of mine, and I am very fond of her. Leigh has taken Rolf once or twice down to the school, and I dare say he was talking to her about the children's treat." Some instinctive jealousy for Leigh prompted her to explain all this so minutely, that the painstaking effort was not lost upon Nigel; but his momentary curiosity seemed past, and he began to yawn again.

"I thought Norman would look in this morning," he observed, by way of changing the subject.

"I wish he would. I am afraid you look tired and dull; shall I read you to sleep again?"

Nigel caught at the idea with gratitude; and, after rummaging in the book-case for a minute, she returned with Tennyson's "Princess" under her arm,

and, curling herself up cosily on the rug at his feet, proceeded to read with an air of great enjoyment.

Nigel lay back on his pillows and listened; large purple and white butterflies floated in at the open window, and a thousand gaudy insects swirled and quivered in the sunlight; the house-martens twittered and chirped round the eaves: Nigel lay and watched the shadows and the delicious swaying and rustling of green leaves, and then turned his eyes on the eager reader with a look of quiet content.

Barbara's reading did not please many people, it was too variable, like her moods: sometimes she enunciated her words powerfully and laboriously, a sort of stammer chained her tongue, her voice became subdued almost to indistinctness; but when she got well into the subject, she became rapid, almost shrill; she threw herself into it, her face worked, her hands gripped each other, her stuttering and hesitation gave way to a clear, unbroken flow of words, she acted more than read. Nigel found a charm in these changeful moods; he thought her face less plain when lighted up with enthusiasm; in a word, Bab and her reading pleased him greatly. They had a long talk after that. Bab told him about her drawing, and her great longing to be an artist. Both were sorry when the door opened, and Norman came in. It was an interruption, Bab felt, and this was written so legibly on her face that

Norman read it. He frowned and grew taciturn in a moment.

"Well, Nigel, how do you feel now?" and he gave his hand to his cousin, merely nodding to Barbara. "All the better for being downstairs, eh?"

"I don't know," said Nigel, perversely; "I think I have a little headache."

"A headache! I dare say you have;" and Norman looked grimly at the gaily bound volume in Barbara's hand. "Barbara must keep her poetry and rubbish to herself, and not excite an invalid so early in the morning."

"She is not exciting me," interrupted Nigel, eagerly catching sight of Barbara's discomposed face; "reading poetry has rather a soothing effect on me than otherwise; only you are such a matter-of-fact fellow, and can't, or rather won't, understand it."

"I thank Heaven I *am* matter-of-fact, and haven't got my head full of moonshine," he returned, sardonically. "Where are Hester and Connie?" he continued. It was clear the grey dress, blue ribbons, and crimson roses had no charms for him this morning, or he would not have eyed them so savagely. "I would lay any wager they are down at the school."

"You are quite right—you always are," assented

Barbara cheerfully; "yes, Hester is down at the school."

"At her post as usual," he returned, meaningly; and then turning to his cousin, "what were you and Barbara talking about when I came in?"

He spoke to Nigel, but he kept his eyes scrutinisingly on Barbara; she frowned at the dictatorial tone, but struck in bravely, "St. Ronans was talking about art; and just as you interrupted us, he was asking me to bring down my portfolio of drawings to show him, but I refused, and reminded him he was an invalid, and must be kept quiet."

"It will only amuse me," pleaded Nigel; and Norman, who looked instantly mollified at the explanation, said brightly,—

"Yes; after all, you are a better judge than I am of these things, Nigel: I should certainly like you to see Barbara's drawings, for both her father and I are very anxious to know whether she has real talent or not."

Barbara stared at the appropriation implied in Norman's speech, but St. Ronans did not seem to notice it.

"Do fetch your portfolio," he continued, good-naturedly addressing her; "my cousin is a first rate artist, and will be able to help you; but you must not be surprised if he prove a harder critic than I did."

Bab smiled, and then, nothing loath, hastened away.

In another moment she reappeared, breathlessly tottering under the weight of a portfolio nearly as big as herself. Dr. Strath met her at the door, and took it from her without a word, and quietly installed himself as exhibitor; at which Nigel looked a little surprised and amused, while Barbara leaned on the couch, chin in hand, and watched them.

It was not an encouraging proceeding, she began to quake visibly after the first moment. Nigel took the drawings from his cousin's hand one by one and laid them aside silently with a dissatisfied face: the merest glance seemed to content him, till he came to the last two or three; these he examined more minutely.

"Well?" said Dr. Strath anxiously. Barbara was too excited to speak.

"These last three pictures are very well worked," he observed in a tone of quiet criticism; "the 'Children nutting in the Woods' especially—a good design and very tolerably carried out, only the coloring is rather patchy."

Norman held it up to the light with admiring eyes. "I call it beautiful, Nigel. I should have thought it quite the work of an artist: I told Barbara so."

Nigel's face wore a covert smile. "My dear

fellow, you were always twice as clever as I; but I remember I never took your opinion on matters of Art: that requires an education of its own. And now for my criticism: these pictures are very pretty, very pretty indeed; there are fine touches here and there, and plenty of taste and fancy; but," eyeing the girl's downcast face kindly, "I don't think Barbara will ever set the world on fire."

Barbara caught her breath and looked up at him. "Does that mean I shall never be an artist?" she asked humbly; but her eyes were dim with repressed tears. She had hoped so much from Norman's criticism, and now she could see this artist cousin of his derided his taste, and scoffed at his judgment.

"'Never' is a long word, Barbara;—how old are you?"

"One-and-twenty," she answered, without the slightest hesitation; for, contrary to the usual custom of her sex, Barbara was willing to avow her age on all occasions boldly.

"One-and-twenty!" he exclaimed, very much startled; "why, I thought you were barely sixteen." Then, seeing she looked rather offended—Bab never liked to be taken for younger than she was—he went on, "Well, it is never too late to learn, and there is sufficient evidence of talent in

your pictures, crude, ill-taught talent as it is, to warrant me in telling you that, with care and patience and careful training, you may do. something worth looking at in four or five years."

"Four or five years!" exclaimed Barbara in a tone of dismay.

"That is the worst of women geniuses," remarked Nigel, with an impatient assumption of experience that set oddly on his boyish face: "they think they can achieve without labour, serve without apprenticeship. They forget," continued the young critic, "that every professional man goes through drudgery before he wins success. Yes, Barbara, in four or five years you may hope to be something of an artist, if you don't rub out your work with your own impatience, as most women do. You are rather a dreamer, and dreamers are seldom workers."

Nigel spoke shrewdly; but he did not know half the truth of what he was saying, or the nature with which he had to deal. Barbara Heathcote had more than one side to her character: she had not ripened yet into the full woman; a dreamer, not a worker, the impulse or force of circumstances that drives to action had not come to her yet.

It was not easy to foretell what Barbara would yet become; she did not know herself. The restlessness of her own nature unsettled her, and made her life

monotonous, and at times unbearable; she said to herself she would do something, find her place in the world, and then sat herself down, with listless hands and brooding brain, and wondered what place that would be. It was one thing to dream of being an artist—fit herself up imaginary studios, and draw from fictitious models; it was quite another matter becoming that whereof she dreamed. Neither was hers a nature that successful ambition could fully satisfy; there would be something wanting yet. The artist might achieve success; but the true woman, that lurked at the bottom of Barbara's heart, would starve and pine fed upon such emptiness.

If Fate would have come to her with either gift in her hand, human love or successful art, Barbara would have closed eagerly with the former; if she could not get love, she said to herself, ambition would be her portion. Alas! how many women think you, reader, drink up these dregs of an unsatisfied life? Ah, if you could look into the heart of many a lonely and gifted one, whose works have enriched and made you glad, what unutterable, what fruitless longings would you read there—longings for the quiet hearth and strong support, the clinging arms of childhood, or, sorest still, for baby lips on desolate breasts, whose pen and brush are to be to them home, husband, and children! Barbara felt something of this struggling womanhood

as she listened to Nigel's words. This art-drudgery, would it fill the gap? A sort of emptiness came to creep into her heart; she forgot her vague dreams; she felt numb and cold. "Is this my life's work?" thought Barbara.

"Four or five years!" echoed Dr. Strath, doubtfully; "well, it will occupy her, and check restlessness." A brightness came over his face. Nigel did not seem inclined to answer; the shrewd gleam had died out; he looked weary, exhausted, somewhat impatient. Dr. Strath saw the look, and hastened to bid him good-by.

At the door he met Barbara and her portfolio again.

"Don't be disheartened, my child," he said kindly, when he saw her tired face. "Nigel thinks more than he says; you must not be discouraged."

"Discouraged; oh no, what does it matter?—what does anything matter?" sighed Barbara.

"Do you think the time he mentioned so long, then, Barbara? I look forward to as many years of weary waiting as you do; and I am not a patient man."

Bab looked up in his face timidly. "But you are so strong, Norman, so strong and so good; and I, what am I?" and she turned away to hide her quivering lip.

"You are my little friend Barbara, are you not?"

"Yes," answered Barbara, gravely, but touched notwithstanding.

"Well, friends shake hands; give me yours. What a little hand it is, Barbara; there, good-by, good-by, my child."

CHAPTER XVI.

BARBARA'S TE DEUM.

"But I could not hide
My quickening inner life from those at watch;
They saw a light at a window, now and then,
They had not set there: who had set it there?"

Aurora Leigh.

BARBARA had not a word for any one during the rest of the day.

Shortly after Norman's visit, Lady Strath and Nest came as usual; but Barbara, instead of running to welcome her favorite, betook herself to her den, and drawing a bolt across the little door that opened on to the stairs, felt herself as inaccessible to the world in general as though she were a hermit in his cell, or Robinson Crusoe in his lonely island.

This complete shutting out of the external world is very necessary to some natures, who thus withdraw themselves from the narrow groove of daily life, for a brief season of refreshment, to indulge in introspection or retrospection, to attain self-knowledge, gain fresh breath and courage for the daily

jostling-match of life—never less lonely than when alone. Of such a nature was Barbara: solitude was meat and drink to her; she grew up self-nourished and self-taught, full of vagaries, but true and honest to the core. Never lioness sought her lair more regularly than Barbara her den; there she fostered her ambition, dreamed dreams, built gorgeous fabrics that melted into thin air before her eyes; there also she groped after a dim faith, strove after an ideal love, and, finding neither the one nor the other, used to cry out on life, and beat her foolish hands together, and then, growing humble as well as wistful, would pray her great unknown Father to take care of little Bab—poor Bab, whom nobody loved or wanted. This little nightly prayer was all Barbara could be said to utter. True, she used to read long paragraphs from her little treasury of devotion, and kneel and fold her hands devoutly as she read; but the meaningless petitions used to pall on her lips as she uttered them; the words floated in space while her heart formed other thoughts—restless, earthly thoughts. And at church it was much the same: she would own herself a miserable sinner in a tolerably loud voice, and confess she did what she ought not to have done; but she managed to weave the oddest dreams in between, and then feel troubled and ashamed as she rose from her knees only to dream it all over again.

I wonder what Bab's guardian angel thought of those prayers. One could imagine him veiling his sorrowful face at those childish mockeries; perhaps weeping such tears as angels only weep, if it be granted them to lament over our fallen humanity. Ah! as we pray our thoughtless prayers, and walk through the miry byways of hidden sins, do we ever consider, think you, the solemn presence that follows us step by step, sorrowful, yet with glittering nimbus round its head, trailing its white wings after us, with its great angel's arms ever stretched out to bless and protect us? And we say it does not matter what we do or think when alone—alone! as though it were ever given to man to be alone, when the eyes of all the church triumphant are upon him, and countless censers wave, and countless prayers ascend that haply he may fight and conquer that one little sin of which he says, "Is it not a little one?" Never less alone than when alone: if we could be taught to believe that, surely, then, every chamber would be a holy of holies, kept swept and garnished, strewn with the bitter herbs of penitence, sweet with the incense of saintly prayers—a place where our guardian angel may love to dwell, and not sigh for an absent heaven.

Barbara's room looked very fresh and cool this lovely summer's morning; the white curtains waved to and fro in the breezy open windows; a yellow

canary piped and twittered in his green cage on the sill; Barbara's rocking-chair was placed invitingly, with her little table beside it, loaded with books and roses; an unfinished drawing lay on the easel, palettes and brush beside it; and Ben's shaggy length littered up the hearth-rug. All was pleasant and home-like, as when she had left it early this morning; but Bab turned wearily away from it all, and went and stretched herself on her little white bed, and felt tired and listless; and buried her head in the pillow, and had a good cry from very heart-sickness and inanition. She could not understand what had happened to her: an hour ago, she had been basking in the sunlight with her flowers, all life and brightness, full of genial talk and pleasantness; and now she was crying like a naughty child without purpose or reason, from sheer fatigue and disgust of herself and life. These sudden revulsions of feeling, unknown to quiet and more self-contained natures, were very common to Barbara: her impatience did not easily brook contradiction; she was easily repressed, frozen up or thawed, as the case might be; she suffered more sometimes from a word or a look than a less delicately organised temperament would from a score of hostile speeches: sometimes she flamed up; sometimes she only fretted in silence: you never knew how Barbara would take anything.

She had spent happy days after Norman's favourable inspection of her pictures: success seemed then within her grasp; labor and failure alike distant. Nigel's cool, dissatisfied face, his meagre praises, his hints of weary years of work and waiting, had suddenly checked her passionate impulses, had reduced her spirits to zero; she had felt suddenly numbed with a curious inexplicable feeling of deadness.

"In four or five years you may hope to be something of an artist," the young critic had assured her; but his looks and words were alike cold. "Something of an artist!" not quite an artist then—only "something of one;" and then she had succumbed to the creeping chill; and that only "if her impatience did not rub out her work, as was the case with many women," as he had somewhat cynically added. Barbara thought his criticism hypercritical, but she did not dare to say so. Norman had called her last picture beautiful, and had warmly praised it; and his eyes had beamed on her with a pleasant approving look, as he did so, that had made her feel great and proud in a moment. But St. Ronan's eyes had merely gleamed a cold steel blue; there was surprise in them, a little cool surprise at her design, but no appreciation, no praise, no genuine admiration; and yet she had craved it of him, feeling him her master, and quite

ready to bow down before the young artist—sitting at his feet, as it were—and all to no purpose.

St. Ronan's had disappointed her: she called him cold, satirical—while all the time he had spoken honestly from his conviction, and then, grieved at her downcast face, had cast about in his own mind how he could help her to knowledge, and further her ambitious schemes. He did not think much of her pictures,—they were very faulty; but he did detect in them, as he said, talent of a certain order, and perhaps power; he would prove the stuff of which she was made: and then he saw her wince at the mention of years of labor and uncertain fruition. "She is like all women," he said to himself; "she is like myself—a dawdler, a dabbler in art. We shall neither of us set the world on fire; but never mind,—I will give her a helping hand;" and so he cast about in his mind how he might best assist her.

And Barbara thought him cruel, and argued out the matter with feeble womanish tears:—not much of a heroine is my Bab! "He reads my nature truly," she said, crushing in her pillow with feverish hands, and staring at a rim of sunlight that flecked the window-seat. "He sees that I live by impulse, and not by principle, that I am hot and hasty of purpose, and that I weary and sicken of delay. Am I the one to patiently work out a

career he talks about, or fashion my life for myself—to toil and moil long years for a world's praise, and then, after all, fail to win it? What do I want? What is it I desire? Am I an artist at heart, or am I only a hungry woman? Where is my place, and how am I to fill it; and when—and where?" sighed Barbara. "Or am I, after all, only a little fool, who plays with palette and brushes, and makes believe to be an artist, and knows that her impulsive hands will never achieve anything worth looking at, and do anything for her own good or for others'?" And then she broke into another strain. "Why is it I never feel like any one else, I wonder?—never talk or look or think as most women do?—am only Bab, Bab, Bab—a babbler and a dreamer of dreams? Why is it Connie laughs at me, and Hester is cross with me, and Daddie shakes his head, and even Mrs. Strath looks astonished? What is it I do that is so different to the generality of people, who live out harmless lives, loved and appreciated? Why, what am I?—what am I? really but a hungry child—a very hungry, lonely child," sobbed Bab.

She was in a sore strait now of perplexity and fret. This new and sudden disgust of life that seized her, what did it mean—these sad, angry clutches at her heart, without rhyme or reason? There was nothing in St. Ronans' cold, gentle

criticism to warrant such an outbreak. It was no use analysing her feelings. It was with her as with many of us: our thoughts and feelings get jammed together, and locked up in our hearts day by day. Then there is a sudden pressure—an inadvertent word, it may be—something that touches us in our vulnerable part; and all at once our pent-up feelings break loose. No one understands us—ourselves least of all. We are ashamed, confounded at our own violence; and yet, after all, it is only the revulsion of nature—one of those internal storms that clear the air and restore us to serenity.

It was so with Barbara. She did not know herself to what a pitch of hope and excitement Dr. Strath's injudicious praise had raised her. She thought more of it than she ought to have done. And St. Ronans had given her a blow. She had succumbed weakly to it, that was all; but it was Norman's kind look and words that had really opened the floodgates. Never had such gentle word and action from him greeted her. "You are my little friend Barbara, are you not?" Barbara lay and thought about it presently when she had quieted herself, and all sorts of pleasant, warm feelings came over her, and by-and-by she fell asleep. It was soft, fragrant evening when she awoke; the purple shadows were gone from the grass; the breeze crept in at the tiny windows, laden

with odors; the birds chirped happy good nights among the trees. Barbara lay tranquilly, with heavy eyelids, and wondered why she felt so light and empty, and then remembered that she had had no dinner; and no one knew where she was—thought she was out, perhaps, as she was missing. She began to feel tolerably ashamed of herself and her brief passion. "After all, it was very childish," she thought; and she shook herself, and crept off the bed, and smiled, and then grew red at the sight of her little pale face, and dashed it into cold water angrily to freshen it up.

She crawls downstairs presently with trimly brushed hair and rosy cheeks, and began laughing and talking, and ate in a famished manner at tea, surprising every one by her account of her long nap.

"Why I thought you were at Mrs. Strath's," said Hester, quite shocked at her own thoughtlessness, and helping Bab literally to everything the table contained. "Why, you must be starved, child!" Barbara only laughed, and bent over her plate, saying a great many foolish things, as was her wont —all the more that St. Ronans lay on the sofa in the background, looking on with perplexed eyes. After tea he said he wished to speak to her; and Bab went and sat quite close to him in the convenient twilight. The others left them, and went

out on the dusky lawn, and a little star glittered out of the soft blue. There was a promise of cool dews on the thirsty flowers; the evening breeze fanned her hot face deliciously.

"Barbara, I want to speak to you. I am afraid I discouraged you this morning." And St. Ronans' voice was soft and gentle. "I did not mean to do that."

"You had perfect right to speak the truth," returned Barbara, in an unconcerned voice, and she hummed a little air to reassure him. "I don't think I care much about it—about being an artist, I mean. I am not sure it is my true vocation, after all; and I don't wan't to be a dabbler only."

"There! see what I have done," returned St. Ronans regretfully. "I have damped your ardor by my severity."

"Do not blame yourself." But Nigel took up her word.

"Well, I do blame myself,—I ought to have been more careful; but it is never too late to mend, as I told you before. I have just arranged with the Doctor to remain here another week. You all make me too comfortable; and, as I told him, I want to find out what real English domestic life means, by enjoying it myself. Well, as I am here and next to useless, I will just tell you what we will do. You

shall bring down your easel, and we will begin in real earnest to-morrow. Your critic shall be your master. Come, do you agree?"

In answer, Bab slid such a soft little hand into his in mute gratitude. She did not speak, because she could not. She had been very faithless, and had wept sorely over her own helplessness; and now this stranger had stretched out a generous hand—he had offered himself as her master. Ah! there would be little doubt she would please and astonish him by her progress. She only wanted help and guidance. No more weary, useless days. Barbara's hopes cropped up afresh, and blossomed into life at these few words. The lonely little heart felt itself cheered and comforted. Nigel was touched at this simple expression of the girl's feelings, so natural and unconventional; but he said no more. He had undone his harsh criticism, and that was all; and presently Barbara left him and went out on the dim, dewy lawn. He could see the faint gleam of her dress winding in and out among the tree-stems, and by-and-by little low snatches of song reached him. He turned round on his pillow well content.

"It is not much good I have done in my life. Let us do a little while the day lasts." And with these words, an hour later, he composed himself to rest.

But Barbara walked up and down the sweet dewy lawn, and tried to count the stars as they suddenly glittered in the dark blue sky, and then watched the moon as it came slowly out of a great snow-heaped bank of clouds, till the whole garden looked shining and transfigured, and the dusky shadows hid themselves behind trees and under fragrant shrubs, or drew zigzag lines of darkness over the silvered grass.

A nightingale was singing in some woods near; there was a twittering and stirring of drowsy birds in their nests; the glow-worm gleamed phosphoric light in the dense shrubberies; the air was full of sweet laughter—happy voices—Barbara looked up with misty eyes, shame-faced and flushing to herself in the dim light, and sang a "Te Deum" in her gladness.

"I have been very faithless," she said to herself —"cowardly and desponding, too—afraid of myself and my own life; crying out upon my helplessness. It may be that the All-Father has sent this aid to me." And then half-wistfully and with strange unused lips, Bab chanted low snatches of the grand old "Te Deum," "To thee all angels cry aloud." What if invisible voices caught up the first quavering notes of praise that ever fell from Barbara's faulty lips, as she walked up and down the lawn, moved out of herself by the infinite beauty of night

—feeling herself strong and comforted—warmed through and through by appreciative kindness, and by the offer of the first helping hand that was stretched over her lonely inner life to teach and guide her.

It would have seemed a slight thing to others, this kindly generosity of Nigel's—a thing to be lightly offered, and lightly accepted, with little question of gratitude or sentiment, but to Barbara it was otherwise—to her it predicted a revolution of her whole life; it gave promise of changed days and happy work; it was as though she had been essaying to climb up a rugged mountain unhelped—unguided, and some one who knew the hidden tracks, and was farther advanced than she, suddenly stooped down and reached out a strong hand to her. Ah, there was hope now that so toiling, and so helped, she might attain hereafter to that bright unknown, which, in her dim half-knowledge, she called fame.

Oh, Barbara, better rest on the wide, green slopes of mediocrity than to climb and struggle, clinging to the skirts of earth's noble ones, and following in their footprints. Alas! what wounds and bruises must they have endured! what bleak airs! what "gales of keenest woe," must they have passed before they stood, laurel-crowned, on the desolate summit, half-way between earth and heaven;

crowned heads and bleeding feet, with dizzy eyes gazing down from unused pinnacles on an envious and bitter world, ah, kings and priests of the beautiful, as they are; surely in another life "a little child shall lead them."

And Barbara sung to herself like a little bird that was grateful for a gleam of sunshine. By-and-by, a low whistle answered hers; a voice called "Bab," and stopped; then quick footsteps hurried after her, and two hands were laid on her shoulders, which turned and brought her face to face with Leigh.

"Leigh, is it you? How you startled me!"

"You must be star-struck, then, Babchen; here have I been whistling and calling to you, and you have only walked straight on, with your head up in the air, and singing the Old Hundredth, I believe."

Barbara laughed, and reached her hand up to his face, with one of her wandering touches, and then a thought struck her, "Why, where have you been, Leigh? How hot you are! and your heart is beating, I can feel it, just as though you had been running hard,—and on this hot night, too!"

"Nonsense," said Leigh, impatiently. "Of course, I've been running all the length of the garden, after you." His voice was light, as usual, but his face was flushed, and his eyes shining with

a restless, eager look in them, very new to Barbara; she felt in a moment anxious, almost uneasy; she could not tell why.

"You have not been in the garden all the evening, Leigh?"

"Of course not; I have been taking a walk; it is such a lovely evening for a stroll. I should have asked you to come too, only you were talking to Strath."

"And you had your walk all alone?" said Barbara, half questioning and half regretful.

"Whatever makes you so curious this evening?" he returned. "What is it you suspect? Speak out plainly, and let's have a truce with all these questions."

Barbara almost jumped in her surprise. Leigh's tone was so unusually irritable. "Why, Gyp," she answered, in a grieved voice, "I did not mean to vex you; what should I suspect, dear?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing," he returned, confusedly. "Don't mind my crossness; Rolf has put me out to-day. Give us a kiss, Bab. I don't deserve such a good little sister, do I?"

His quick repentance bewildered Barbara more than his irritability, all the more that she could see, in the uncertain light of the shrubbery path, that his face was working with some new emotion. Leigh was not himself to-night. She had noticed

for some days a sort of reserve seemed creeping up between them; and this barrier distressed, and at the same time frightened, her.

"Leigh," she said, timidly, twisting her little finger into his button-hole, "you have not talked to me lately as you used to do; you never come up to my den of an evening now. Are you sure you are as fond of me?" she added, in a sort of frightened whisper; for Leigh did not like her to be too demonstrative, she knew, and she was rather dubious how he would take her question now, but she need not have been afraid, for he only drew her to him with a rough fondness.

"Why, Babchen, my dear Dame Muffet!" and he patted her cheek, and tried to laugh it off, and stroked down her hair with his great hand, and did not grow impatient, when she clung to him with many kisses. Only by-and-bye, when she wanted him to walk on with her, and listen to her history of the day, he pleaded fatigue, and went away from her, with some trifling excuse or other. Barbara did not feel in the mood to resume her lonely stroll, so she went and joined herself to two dark figures who were pacing the lawn before the house; one of them was Norman; but as he seemed talking seriously, she did not speak to him, but went and nestled herself under her father's arm, and was much taken up for some minutes in endeavouring to accommodate

her hoppity step to their long strides, and, finding all her efforts fruitless, continued to make two steps to their one, which turned her walk into a *deux-temps* valse. So Barbara waltzed all to herself, and Norman talked on; he was saying, "It seems a low, lingering sort of fever, doctor, and the poor creatures, ill-fed as they are, easily succumb to it, it seems terribly contagious."

Dr. Heathcote shook his head. "There is not a single case in Sunningford, thank God."

"My dear sir, don't be thanking Providence too soon; trust me it will spread here soon enough. There are two cases down with it in the cottages round Dort's Mill, and I spoke to Paul Hillyard about not letting his women folk run in and out of the infected cottages. I thought it only right to give him warning, as I know Ruth Canham is much given to visiting the poor about there."

"Ah, that reminds me I had better speak to Hester," interposed the other hastily. "I can't have her putting herself into danger, and she so delicate."

"Yes, it is just as well to give her a hint," replied Norman; "and Connie, she seems following in her sister's footsteps; as for Barbara," here he gave a furtive glance to the little figure on the doctor's arm. "Well, the sick and the needy do not know Barbara among them." He spoke rather sadly, not satirically, and Bab hung her head under the well-

merited reproof. Another time, she would have resented its truth hotly, but not to-night.

"Well, well," returned her father soothingly, "it is not our Bab's vocation, I suppose. Don't be too hard on her, Norman. Well, you have brought bad news to-night from Durnford, but our course is clear, we will fight the fever, and try a few sanitary reforms in Sunningford; only they will laugh at us to our faces."

"I would begin with Susan Moggs, if I were you, sir. Have that heap of refuse moved from her back premises, and try and get them to open some of their windows. Last time I paid them a visit I was half choked with the heat and the smoke; only one window that will open, I believe."

"Well, I will go my rounds to-morrow," replied the doctor, "and you do the same at Durnford; but I won't promise myself or you much success. Susan Moggs is one of the most obstinate as well as the dirtiest woman in the village. I'll try and frighten her by telling her the fever will be sure to come to her first. And then there's old Purdock, he is even worse than she."

And then they talked about different cottages, and over the sanitary reforms they meant to carry out. Dr. Heathcote expressed his intention of applying to the Board of Health, and speaking to Sir Geoffrey Hunsden, who, as a landowner and lord

of the manor, had a right to insist on improvements. "Only, Susan Moggs' cottage is a freehold," groaned the doctor. "I fear we have no right to make her windows open against her will."

"But the Board can insist on her moving her heap," replied Dr. Strath. "I wish she and her beggarly crew would go to the workhouse, for she is a perfect nuisance to the parish, always in some hot water or other."

And so they talked on. Barbara heard little scraps here and there, but not much. Norman's speech was rankling in her mind. All she took in of the conversation was that there was a low fever raging round Dort's Mill.

By-and-by Dr. Heathcote was summoned to the surgery, and Norman and she were left alone; and then Norman looked at his watch in the moonlight, and exclaimed at the lateness of the hour. "Far too late for you to be walking about on the grass bare-headed," he said in his quiet professional manner, as he put his hand lightly on her head. "Why, your hair is wet with dew. Run in, child, or we shall have you ill next."

"I am never ill," answered Barbara.

Dr. Strath smiled at her gravely. "Well, your turn may come some day, but I trust it may be long first. What—are you going away without saying good-night to me?"

"Good-night, Dr. Strath."

"Good-night, Barbara; what was it I called you this morning?"

"You said I was your little friend, Norman, did you not?" answered Bab with a new shyness.

"Ah, yes, my little friend—a good name, Barbara. There, good-bye, dear child; God bless you." He seemed about to say something more, but checked himself. His hands held hers firmly for a minute—such a strong warm clasp—and then he let her go, and Bab fled into the house with a strange pleasure beating at her heart which she did not understand in the least, but which she had never felt before in her life.

CHAPTER XVII.

BAB'S MASTER.

"No woman can be handsome by the force of features alone, any more than she can be witty only by the help of speech."—*Hughes.*

"As for my wife,
I would you had her spirit in such matter;
The third of the world is yours; while with a snaffle
You may pace easy, but not such a wife."

Shakspeare.

THE next morning Barbara was up with the lark, and she and Ben had paid a visit to the firwoods long before breakfast, had wetted their feet with dew by skirting the green hollow which she always called now "Nest's Pulpit," and made their appearance at the family meal with appetites sharpened by exercise; for Ben always shared Bab's breakfast, sitting on his haunches gravely, with a bib tied round his neck, slobbering and licking his lips, and watching his mistress with watery eyes as she compounded savoury messes for him generally before she tasted food herself.

Breakfast was always a merry and often a prolonged meal at Heathcote; but this morning Barbara rather hurried her own repast and Ben's,

and she was unusually silent, too, interchanged fewer jokes with the Doctor, though she and he always had it their own way at breakfast, and were the life of the table—nay, she even put a stop to Leigh's flow of nonsense by Mr. Burchell's "fudge," uttered at intervals, and, much to Ben's disgust, left off munching the delicate crisp toast in which he always showed a peculiar interest, pushed back her chair, forgot her grace—no unusual thing with our little sinner—and, nodding radiantly round the table, left Ben in his bib, an image of doggish despair.

"Whatever makes Barbara in such a hurry this morning?" said Hester, peeping round the urn at her father. But Dr. Heathcote only shook his head smilingly, and went on with his paper. Leigh, who was cutting a periodical, whistled up Ben the disconsolate, and soothed him with choice modicums of crust. Ben, who had felt himself wounded in the tenderest part, began to wag his tail feebly, and with a sort of dim idea that petticoat government was becoming slightly tyrannical, turned radical on the spot.

"Let's go and find the missus," said Leigh, presently, putting his hands in his pocket and striding lazily to the window; and so man and dog investigated lawn and shrubberies, and finally searched the den itself, but without success. "Why where's Dame Muffet?" he asked, as he

encountered Hester on the threshold of the harlequin room; but Hester merely shrugged her shoulders with that cool indifference to Bab's whereabouts which always marked her manner in the early morning, and went jingling her keys in housewifely fashion.

"Who wants Dame Muffet?" cried out a cheery voice from the distance. Hester faced about in the utmost astonishment. There was Bab solemnly invested in a great bib apron stained with paint and reaching to her heels, her hair tucked back and combed from her ears after the fashion of a charity girl, her easel blocking up Hester's favourite window so as to command the best light, and St. Ronans' empty couch beside it.

Hester looked aghast, as well she might. "Barbara, I don't think you ought to litter up the drawing room like this with that great ugly easel. Why you are quite spoiling the best window in the room.

Barbara turned round with the utmost gravity. "Please don't jingle those keys so, Essie. Yes, I am going to take my first lesson with St. Ronans this morning. You need not make any difference for me, you know," she continued, in a tone of the utmost suavity. "I shan't mind your talking, and Geoffrey can come in all the same, he won't disturb me a bit."

Hester could not believe her ears, such cool effrontery was beyond her comprehension. "But, Barbara, you don't understand me. The drawing room is where Connie and I sit and work and receive visitors. You are so much in your den, you see, that you don't know our ways. You must take your lesson elsewhere, I can't have the best room in the house messed over like that."

Barbara shouldered her palette and sparred with her paint brush at Ben, leaving a spot of yellow ochre on his nose. "You don't like the piebald room messed over, Essie?"

"Well, no, I don't," returned Hester, honestly. "Come, Barbara, you've got good sense, I see. Leigh will help you to carry away all that rubbish, and I will put the room straight in a moment."

"Carry up the easel carefully, then, Leigh," said Bab, cheerfully. "Ben, if you touch my portfolio I will paint you blue. Essie, you will explain to Daddie and Norman, please, what they will otherwise think rather queer, when they hear such a grand visitor as St. Ronans is obliged to go up to a place which is little better than a garret, to give me lessons."

"No, that will never do," broke in Leigh. Nigel Strath can't go and sit in that beggarly little room, Hester."

"There is the dining-room and the breakfast-room," said Hester, decidedly.

"Yes, but in one room there are always meals about, and in the other Susan does her sewing. I don't think St. Ronans would care to sit with Susan, or to be harassed with the clatter of plates." Hester fairly hesitated, and grew troubled, the delay and Barbara's sharp wits saved her, for she was inwardly resolved that in that room and no other would she take her lessons. "That will do, Leigh, please," said Barbara, smiling. "I don't want you for anything more; take Ben away with you, Hester does not like him in the drawing room, and go up to St. Ronans' room and tell him I am quite ready"—with a little emphasis on the "quite ready" that he understood in a moment. And as soon as Leigh had started on her errand she said, very sweetly, "It is too late to alter things this morning, Essie, and that will give you plenty of time to arrange what room is best for us in future."

Hester was puzzled and anxious, but Bab's unusual deference and ready compliance softened her, and so Bab had her way. Hester found the room more cheerful with St. Ronans and Barbara in it—it amused her to listen to their endless chatter—in a few mornings she ceased to grumble at the easel, found Barbara an ornamental stand for her brushes and paint-box, and betook herself

cheerfully with Connie to another window where the garden view was not half so pretty. Nay, she even went farther, for Ben, daring to follow Barbara in once or twice, was suffered to remain so unmolested that he ceased to sneak under table covers, and showed his great form openly stretched out on the softest rug, and blinked at Hester drowsily, quite as much at home as in the den.

The lessons proceeded rapidly. Nigel seemed to have found a new interest, he was so active and energetic. He soon proved himself a good master, and, to do her justice, Bab was a most ready and docile pupil. She was quick to take ideas, untiring in industry, and proof against his impatience; for though Nigel was very gentle with her the first two or three lessons, it was too much to expect him to change his nature all of a sudden. He soon got back to his irritable ways, spoke dictatorially, was brusque in his manner, and did not spare satirical speeches when she failed to please him.

But Barbara, who waxed hostile at Norman's least word, was lamb-like in her demeanor to her young master; her words were always conciliating, almost affectionate; she was not slow to apologise where apology was admissible, or if that were not feasible, to disarm his fretful reproaches by some soft little speech of her own. Hester used to wonder and comment on her exceeding patience—to her it

was a new marvel, in her heart she thought Nigel often carping and fastidious, though she never said so.

But it was with Barbara as with many another woman, she felt a kind of tenderness to this man, whose weakness and delicacy moved her to compassion—who showed to her so continuously the faulty side of his character; she found him loveable and admirable in spite of his many defects, and though she felt instinctively that she was stronger than he, she did not care to assert her own superiority or measure wills, it would not have pleased her to do so, she humbled herself voluntarily to fulfil his behests; his harsh speeches did not hurt her, she learnt to understand them and himself too, and never suffered them to break for a moment her obstinate cheerfulness, and in all these things there was something great in Bab, seeing she did not love the man in spite of his beautiful face, but only had the quiet liking that a sense of mutual benefits and a community of tastes so pleasantly engendered. She grew to like him better and better as time went on, but I am speaking of early days now, when St. Ronans had his way, and Barbara grew humble, and softened by happy work and such appreciation as she had never known, and so, day after day, grew the web that became so sorely tangled by-and-by.

The week became ten days, and then lengthened

into a fortnight, but still Nigel nursed his wounded hand, kept on invalid airs, and maintained his position as guest and patient at the Doctor's house. A favorite with every one, from the Doctor downwards, as Bab said, one day, they had never known their aim or duty in life till St. Ronans came, and found both consisted in waiting on him. It might have been so from the deference every one showed the young stranger; it was quite wonderful to see how he ruled this household, especially the women. Hester became quite meek and subservient, and as for Connie—but we will talk about Connie later.

Nigel was never captious or contradictory with Hester. He talked to her and paid her little chivalrous attentions, as any man would to so beautiful a woman; he liked to have her near him—to feel her soft motherly touches about his couch—her little fusses over him, her deft housewifely ways pleased him, as did the calm of her continual presence; he liked to lie and look at her as though she were some picture or statue, placed there for his delectation, he grew to acknowledge that she looked well in all lights and under all circumstances; that her stateliness and sweetness were equal, and that she reigned over her father's house like a queen.

And then she had other virtues—she could not talk, not as Bab could, for example; Hester was

apt to grow a little prosy and slow in her conversation, she never advanced theories of her own, and rarely understood other people's—but she was an admirable listener. She had such tact, such sympathy, her face was not mobile, it was too statuesque for that, but her large grey eyes opened so widely and softly on the talker, she sat so still and smiled so sweetly, and then her few words were so full of rare appreciation, and all without effort—quiet, full of grace, as befits the true woman.

Lady Strath grew alarmed, as well she might, at her son's prolonged absence; she was loud in her reproaches during her daily visit, and not at all comforted by Nigel's oft repeated excuses that he was studying English domestic life in its most primitive state. "Why, mother," he would say sometimes, "this visit may be the making of me, supposing I came home a steady respectable character, and left all my unsettled views behind me; come, now, would it not be worth while indulging me in my freak a week or two longer. I am not outstaying my welcome either, for no one wants to get rid of me."

"But I want you home again sadly, Nigel," returned Lady Strath, more frightened than she cared to own at her son's speech; "it is very dreary without you at St. Ronans. I don't want my boy to come back to me any different, you were always

settled and steady enough for me." And the poor mother looked at Hester with jealous angry eyes as she spoke, making little doubt in her own mind that it was her fair face which kept Nigel such a willing prisoner at the Doctor's house; she scarcely spoke to her for two or three days after that—keeping her at a distance in the way some women can, much to Hester's chagrin and annoyance; nor did she renew her old friendliness until, one day, she became accidentally acquainted with Sir Geoffrey Hunsden's pretensions, and then she almost overpowered her with her congratulations and caresses, making her understand that she regarded the Doctor's penniless daughter, and a baronet's *fiancée*, as very different people. Barbara was present at this little scene, and almost killed herself with suppressed laughter; her shrewdness had detected in a moment the secret of Lady Strath's dissatisfied face and excessive haughtiness, and she had taken the most elfish delight in hiding Sir Geoffrey's existence from her, adding fuel to her fears in every possible way, but at last Nest had betrayed them, and now Lady Strath was embracing Hester with lavish demonstrations of affection—and Hester's face was growing cloudy and red under the public infliction. "Indeed, dear Lady Strath, you are mistaken," she exclaimed, trying to release herself, but in vain.

"Mistaken, my dear Hester—you must let me call

you so, for I am as fond of you as though you were my own daughter. Nay, I can hardly be wrong with Nest for my authority. Indeed, my dear girl, you must let me congratulate you on such an excellent match; though, after all, it is only a position to which your beauty entitles you," and Lady Strath smoothed down the dark glossy hair, and whispered that it would grace a coronet—but Hester, who despised compliments, and knew besides that Nigel and Barbara were amused spectators of this scene, drew up her head haughtily, and spoke out, coloring hotly, but with proper feminine dignity.

"Whoever was your authority, Lady Strath, has told you wrong, your congratulations are premature, singularly so I must say; there is only the slightest possible understanding between Sir Geoffrey and myself, nor shall I hold myself bound to him for another year—nor he to me, and not then if we do not mutually desire it." This last, spoken in a tone of the utmost coolness, as though she wished Lady Strath to understand that it was a matter of complete indifference to her—all the more that she felt in her own heart that time was reconciling her to Geoffrey's slow wooing, that she was becoming more blind to his faults of character, and less alive to his many personal defects; more she began to feel that though she could never love him, who had once loved Arthur Mayhew, still she could do her duty happily to him,

and life could pass peaceably with them two, seeing that the man was honourable in his generation, and she could do reverence to the strong integrity that was the basis of his character. Yes, Hester began to esteem simple honest Geoffrey—but more of that anon.

Lady Strath was very much discomfited by Hester's proud reply; it came into her head that she might be keeping her suitor back in the hope of winning Nigel. The young master of St. Ronans would be almost as good a match as the other, and infinitely preferable if one took into consideration his great personal attractions. Yes, it must be this; Hester must be playing one against the other; her boy had fallen into a trap through his own wilfulness, and he who might have mated with one of the highest county families, would be inveigled into marrying a country doctor's daughter, just because she had a fair face and carried her head proudly. And Lady Strath during many a sleepless night cursed the day he ever set foot in Heathcote House, and wearied herself to death by devising one scheme after another for breaking the spell that seemed to be upon him —schemes that fell to the ground worse than fruitlessly, seeing that he opposed them by the mere force of will. Nigel was not blind to his mother's fears on his own account, but he never tried to

combat them, though he laughed long and secretly; he thought time would prove her error to her better than he.

He grew a little proud over it too; "Does my mother think that Hester Heathcote is the only beautiful woman I have ever seen?" he said to himself; "does she imagine that I who have travelled half over Europe and seen every form and variety of female loveliness, should come home fancy free—to be madly infatuated with a doctor's daughter, just because she has fine eyes and a good figure? A woman, too, whose ideas are narrowed to her own petty circuit of village life! Pshaw!" And Nigel lay and pondered what faces he had seen that might dim and cast Hester's in the shade, and never rested till he had counted over a score; and then he scoffed afresh at his mother's fantastic folly.

Nigel Strath was singularly fastidious, as we have said; but he was also impressionable. Twenty-five may pretend to philosophy, but it cannot fail of the susceptibility of youth. Nigel was only a very young man, with a warm sensuous temperament, after the true artist model; he had not escaped heart-free during his continental sojourn, in spite of his weak health and stoical pretences—far from it; his flirtations had been numerous, and he had been engaged twice: once to a young German

Baronne, whose fair-haired beauty had enthralled him, he thought no one on earth could be compared to his gentle Gretchen; but he saw her eat once—his English fastidiousness was shocked, and her beauty paled sadly from that day. They quarrelled—at least he did, and Gretchen cried her blue eyes dim, and then went and married a red-faced Graf, old enough to be her father, and became the prettiest little Graffenin in the world, and when Nigel met her again they were excellent friends.

And then there was Maria, the young Florentine whom he had met at the French Embassy, and whom he followed with the ardor and romance of an Italian, and the dogged perseverance of an Englishman. The world had never held so beautiful a creature, he swore; and they were engaged—for Nigel could make himself fascinating when he chose, and Maria really loved her pale-faced lover, and more's the pity; for happening to overhear a little fracas, a mere dispute—nothing in the world but a scolding from Maria to her maid, Nigel's love waxed cold and fell away. Heaven forbid, he said, that he should bring this beautiful virago into his English home; though her angel's face should drive him mad he would not do it—and so they parted; and Lady Strath, who grew alarmed lest Nigel should learn to rue her wrath in this land of stilettos,

never desisted from her entreaties till he consented to set sail for England; and with the remembrance of Maria's dark eyes still glowing freshly in his mind, no wonder he held lightly his mother's estimation of Hester's influence; for, though he promised himself an English wife before many years were over, that wife should not be Hester Heathcote: so he told himself; Sir Geoffrey Hunsden was welcome to her; and he laughed a low laugh of amused content. He found something else to laugh at before many days were over, for Connie, feeling terribly neglected and dull, shook her yellow curls over her eyes, and deliberately set her cap at the young stranger.

It was terribly dull at home, without anyone to flirt with or to praise her pretty face; Connie had a little secret of her own, a grave, tremendous secret, which she guarded with the jealousy of sweet seventeen. The vicar had an orphaned nephew, whom he adopted and educated as his own son; and so it fell that Sydney Herbert and Connie were thrown much together, and in their old childish days Sydney had been Connie's little sweetheart.

But Sydney had grown a tall strong fellow now, with a fair beardless face, and a habit of blushing that was very painful to him; and Hester, who had guessed at their secret—though Connie had kept it

even from her—was not at all sorry that Mr. Herbert had sent him to join a reading party at the Lakes, instead of dawdling away his long vacation in the Heathcote garden; it would separate them, and prevent things going too far. Sydney would have time to know his own mind, and Connie's foolish heart would be in her own keeping a little longer. So Hester reasoned in her wise way, most careful for her child's happiness; she and her father had a long talk about it one day, and the doctor pished and pooh-pooh'd a good deal in his droll manner, at the idea of their Connie being a grown-up woman. "Impossible;" "nay, not impossible," Hester assured him very gently, though with tears in her eyes; by-and-by, in a few years' time, if they both know their own minds, and were faithful to their childish loves, it would be an excellent thing for Connie—for Sydney was a clever young fellow, and would practise as barrister, and Mr. Herbert would leave him quite a neat little property when he died, though their Connie must live in London, she feared.

"Softly, softly, my dear," answered her father; "Mr. Herbert will live twenty years yet, and Sydney—confound the fellow—why does he want my Connie?—may be a briefless barrister, dragging on long weary terms of years before he gets his start. Keep them apart, Hester; let them see

as little of each other as possible; time enough when he gets his degree and sets up his chambers—and even then I hate long engagements. So Hester kept them apart, and was not at all sorry when Sydney paid his sad lingering adieus, and went off to the Cumberland lakes; nor would she pity Connie, when she went languidly up and down the garden paths, and left off practising and reading, and forgot to tend her roses; nay, she even grew hardhearted, scolded her severely for a fit of hysterics she had one hot day, and threatened a course of cod-liver oil if she saw her look so thin and drooping—a summary proceeding which had the effect of bracing up love-sick Connie, though she still slept with a locket round her neck, and wept copious tears over a discolored piece of blue ribbon she had taken off his straw hat; but she moped less about the house, ate more, and, by-and-by, when Nigel took up his quarters among them, broke out into her old smiles; and, on the maxim, "out of sight, out of mind," forgot Sydney's blushing attentions, and shook her yellow curls in Nigel's face.

If a kitten had sat up and purred softly at him Nigel would not have been less moved, he did not harden his man's heart against the little girl, her pretty rosy face forbade that, but he put a stop to her sentimentality and gushing little ways

in the oddest and brusquest manner, he patted her on the head as it were—laughed at her airs and graces and quizzed her smart braveries, and further humiliated her by refusing to accept a single service at her hands; and all in a good-natured brotherly way that had the effect of restoring Connie to her senses again. But such is the cringing nature of women, seventeen in particular, that must and will love something; Connie began smearing her blue ribbon over again—and the one or two merry letters that Sydney wrote to her were rendered illegible by much reading and were reduced to fragments and mere figments of penmanship.

Barbara's oddities became quite refreshing after Connie's milk-and-water sentimentalities. Barbara's greatest enemy could not accuse her of airs and graces, she was like a whiff of free healthy moorland breeze on an autumn day, a little keen and whistling, perhaps, rather roughening to smooth skins, administering wholesome friction as it were, but full of sweetness notwithstanding.

The little brown girl, whose homely dress and ways Lady Strath so despised, was growing Nigel's fast friend, I suppose on the principle that extremes meet; for what charm could the quaint little figure in her paint-stained apron and brown *crêpé* hair tucked back behind her ears, find in the eyes

of this critical young artist, always neat and faultless in his attire, and strong in antipathy to what he called "left-handed women." He had the impertinence to tell Barbara once, when he was vexed at her appearance before his mother, that when she had done her hair last her fingers must have been all thumbs, and then he told her about the bird in the furze bush; would you believe it—but Barbara walked up straight to her room, and by dint of much brushing, water and cosmetique, reduced her hair to a dull satin-looking plaster, unwholesomely dark and moist, knotted it up in a comb, neat, without a stray hair, and so spent the evening before Nigel's and his mother's eyes, the veriest little fright that was ever seen. Even Dr. Heathcote was ashamed of his brown puss, as he sometimes called her, though why was not perceivable, seeing that her skin in reality was as fair as Hester's. As for Nigel, after the first glance, he never looked again nor addressed one single observation to her the whole evening, and the next day, to punish her more fully, flatly refused to give her her lesson; and such was the terror of this last piece of tyranny that Bab fought her stubbornness bravely, and never offended his eyes when she could help it. And by-and-by the brown furze was in full relief again.

They had long talks together after they had

finished work, or in the dim twilight; the "battle of the lights," as Barbara called it, which so often depresses some people always soothed and calmed Nigel. However irritable and fretful he had been through the day he always became mild, softened, and often brilliant at this hour; he used to describe Italian galleries, or tell of his artist life at Rome, or of many a continental wandering; sometimes they discussed books together, or dabbled, like two blind babies, in Philosophy and Metaphysics. Sometimes Barbara listened, but oftener she talked. She would confess her ignorance frankly and charmingly, but talked on all the same, floundering out of her depth in the most reckless way, making no secret that she had lost her foothold, falling down flat in the midst of an argument, and then picking herself up and darting into it afresh in a breathless manner, the most cheerful little blunderer in the world, and through it all delighting Nigel with her quaint phraseology, dry humor and fresh originality of ideas, so that he stamped her in his own mind as the most delicious little antique that ever came to light in this weary, new-fangled nineteenth century, and called her to her face by the oddest and most elfish names, "Nix," "Brownie," "Sprite," or sometimes his "bright eyed Peri;" he generally rechristened her every other day. Sometimes she was "Dame Bustle,

the Babbler," or the "Cuckoo"—in reference to her habit of whistling; there was no end to her appellations, and she carried them with all the same cool indifference as though she had answered to each one, and no other, all her life.

Hester used to wonder at these conversations; she would creep nearer in the twilight and listen to them, she began to respect Barbara, it seemed as though she had never known anything of her sister's mind before; could this deep thinker, this quiet talker be Bab, she said to herself sometimes as she went silently away on some household business, and often she sighed, as she went.

But there was another wonder, and that was Nest. Who would recognise in Nest now the shy trembling girl who sat trying to straighten her bent shoulders and answering Hester in faltering monosyllables?

She would always be a gentle shrinking creature with startled eyes, her crushed life had done so much for her; but with all that there was a change in her; as she moved among them now, with her sweet face and happy laugh, she used to remind Barbara of the dove that Noah pulled into the Ark. It must have been such a weary dove—such a worn-out creature—with its forlorn and drooping wings—it had taken such long desolate flights—it had passed in its loneliness over such seething and

tempestuous waters, it had not yet plucked the olive branch; think with what helpless flutters it must have nestled into the outstretched hand waiting to receive it.

In some such way, Barbara's subtle brain worked it all out, had Nest, forlorn little wanderer, fallen into the kind hands that were stretched out to welcome her; for the first time a happy home—a family circle received her into its midst, with warm cherishings which must have been scarcely less acceptable to her sorely tried spirit than that sheltering fondling hand was to the weary dove.

Like the flower that opens to the sunshine and unfolds its grateful leaves to the dews of Heaven, so Nest's shut-up nature expanded under this genial influence; and, in more ways than one, the lonely girl became another creature.

It was pleasant to see her with Barbara, but she soon grew at home with them all. She became almost merry with Connie—had pretty little appealing ways with Hester, and struck in boldly when Barbara talked with her brother—much to Nigel's secret surprise and pleasure—but she was especially devoted to the kind Doctor, and prattled away to him as they walked round the garden, and thought him in her own mind the noblest and dearest man in the world. She did not much

affect Leigh, he was too noisy for her, but she grew more attached to Norman every day, and she even began to feel an interest in Geoffrey Hunsden; perhaps the pleasantest visit Geoffrey ever paid was one day when Hester was called away on parochial business, Nigel reading and Barbara wrapped up in her painting, and Nest took him under her protection in her timid little way and made talk for him and herself too.

How Nigel used to quiz those visits of Geoffrey's and retail them to his mother, much to her and Barbara's amusement, with ridiculous annotations of his own. Sir Geoffrey used to stroll up to Heathcote House once or twice a week, with his pointer at his heels, in shamefaced obedience to Lady Hunsden's suggestions.

"She will slip away altogether before the year is out, Geoff," his mother would say, with a nudge at breakfast time; and Geoff, perhaps, who had promised himself a day's hunting or shooting, or trout angling, as the case might be, would eye his gun or fishing tackle disconsolately, thrust his great hands deeper down into the pockets of his shooting coat, whistle gravely to his old favorite "Nell," and saunter down the Brackley roads with the air of a man who has made up his mind to a disagreeable business which he must carry through without the faintest notion how it was to be done. The length

and heaviness of his wooing oppressed Geoffrey dreadfully, he began to rebel at the long ordeal Hester had placed before him. "If a man's got to be executed, what's the use of being such a long time about it?" he would growl to himself occasionally, or sometimes when the day was fine and he felt unusually restive, "There's handsomer women than even Hester Heathcote in the world who would jump at what I've got to offer her—perhaps after all this waiting," and here I am obliged to confess that Geoffrey used a strong expression—"perhaps, after all this, she will throw me over." And with these pleasant thoughts uppermost he used to make his appearance in the Harlequin drawing-room with the heavy cheerfulness of an over-driven ox, who feels himself put upon and does not like to say so.

But Hester never seemed to notice these cold fits of Geoffrey's. She had got used to his stammering advances and his poor attempts at conversation; sometimes, indeed, when he got on the hunting field and related for the twentieth time some marvellous trait of sagacity in Nell, or some worn-out joke of Lady H.'s, Hester would gently remark, "I have heard that before, Geoffrey," or "Please, don't tell me what those rough hunting squires say," reproofs that, however delicately conveyed, always put him to dire confusion and invariably

silenced him; and Hester would have it all her own way. And then how she bored him. Nigel was forced to confess that she was very injudicious in her treatment of him; for his own part he thought Geoffrey was the one to be pitied. "Our luckless wooer has been here again," he would say to his mother. "Gracious! what a pair to run together in the traces! What do you say, Barbara? Don't you think that speech worthy of the Hunsden? Oh dear! oh dear! I shall explode some day when they are together, I know I shall!" And Nigel threw himself back on his couch and laughed till the tears ran down his face. Barbara looked on, her face dimpling with amusement, but with her centre of gravity quite undisturbed. "I am too used to it to laugh, St. Ronans," she would say in her droll manner, "and, after all, it is no laughing matter."

"Don't believe her, mother—it was the finest joke in the world. The Hunsden was sitting in that chair there looking the picture of florid discontent; while Hester was, as usual, on her parochial hobby-horse, and did she not ride him to death just? She is a handsome woman and a very pleasant companion, if you know how to manage her." Here Nigel drew up his head with a conscious air; "but she is a tremendous bore to him."

"Indeed," said Lady Strath, rather stiffly. "I

think she is a very good sort of young woman, Nigel, and pretty too, if you admire such a pale face."

"Fie, fie, my lady, and this from you who avowed so lately that stately head deserved a coronet." Nigel opened his eyes rather widely and made a signal that they were not alone; but Lady Strath cared nothing at all for Barbara. "Well, I've said nothing I am ashamed of," she repeated, a little shortly. "There must be different opinions even on the subject of Miss Heathcote's beauty."

"Take care, mother, or my Brownie will be flying at you. No, there can be but one opinion—that Hester Heathcote is very attractive; well, what was I saying? Oh! she was on the subject of workhouses and one Molly Holt, whom she declares was incarcerated in one, and deprived of two aged luxuries, to wit, tea and snuff. I could not quite understand whether she wished to see her *fiancé* in future dispensing these unwholesome articles, but Sir Geoffrey seemed to think she had some such idea, for he fumbled in his pockets in a helpless kind of way, till she came to his relief, pounced upon the coin she wanted, and bagged it before his eyes; he evidently thought now that he had bought himself off, and began straightening himself in a cheerful sort of way; but not a bit of it, she was down on him again in a fresh place, about some tumble-

down cottages or other, and then she was called away, and Nest came in."

But the visit that Nigel so caricatured was certainly the pleasantest that Sir Geoffrey had ever known, despite its ominous beginning, for just as Hester rose, with a "I'll tell you all about it when I come back, Geoffrey," and he had stumbled across the drawing-room, in his thick boots, to open the door for her, and stumbled back again, Nest came in like a flash of sunshine through the window, and all the heaviness was gone. Sir Geoffrey had seen Nest at Church, and had been introduced to her at the Vicarage, but he was not at all prepared for her taking gentle possession of him and making him so thoroughly at home. "Go and talk to Geoffrey," Barbara had whispered, "St. Ronans and I are busy, and he is such a bore." So Nest came towards him timidly, with the soft dignity that never deserted her, and seated herself before this rough Newfoundland of a man, with the sincere desire to do her duty by him.

She began by praising Nell, whom she had met prowling round Connie, and the flower-beds, "such a dear dog, such an intelligent face," she said.

Geoffrey's handsome but heavy countenance cleared in a moment, his tongue seemed loosened by magic. "'Pon honor," he began, "she is the finest dog I have ever seen in my life—she has a history,

that animal has, Miss Strath," and then it all came out, the anecdote Hester had heard over and over, only enlarged and commented on, as he saw Nest's genuine interest; and then he went on—the man had got a start, no gentle propriety was there to check him, "who says I can't talk," he thought once, as he stroked his fair moustache, and five minutes after that he was on the forbidden hunting-fields—he and Nest were leaping five-barred gates together, struggling through hedges, and in at the death, too; and then she was introduced to his favourite hunters, made acquainted with their several peculiarities and beauties, and not a little mystified at the terms in which they were expressed. "What do you mean by the fetlock and the pastern, and those other things you mentioned?" Geoffrey blundered a little over his explanations, but he enjoyed it notwithstanding. She thought his conversation manly, and asked Barbara afterwards if he were not clever, he knows so much about horses and dogs. "Some one told me he never talked; why, I could hardly stop him once when I wanted to ask a question." Nor was Nest exaggerating, the man waxed quite eloquent on those subjects in which he felt himself at home. Nest's artless interest warmed him and drew him out—both were quite sorry when Hester returned, but Geoffrey, who had not seemed in the least hurry the minute before, now broke off in the

middle of a description of Artemis, who won last year's Derby, and grasped his hat in hot haste.

"Why, you surely are not going, Geoffrey!" exclaimed Hester, in a disappointed tone; "I was just going to sit down comfortably and tell you all the rights of the case about those cottages."

"I will come again and hear it; I can't wait now," gasped Geoffrey, pulling on his gloves by main force. "I've promised Lady H. a drive in the mail phaeton; can't put off the old lady; sorry all the same, Hester."

"Who do you call Lady H.?" asked Nest, curiously looking up in his face.

"Oh! Lady H. is the Mum. Eh! what's the matter, Hester?"

"So often as I have begged you not to call her by that name," said Hester in an aggrieved voice. "It is not right, Geoffrey; it is not reverent. When she gets older, it will sound badly from you."

"Eh, what!" repeated Geoffrey, looking at her with surprise. To tell the truth, Hester seemed rather put out, a little cross—though why she could not have told. "Irreverent: not a bit of it; I've always called the Mum Lady H. ever since we've been left together. It is a little joke between us. Lady H.—why, what should I call her?"

"It is not for me to tell you," returned Hester, meaningly, but very much provoked.

And Nest crept up to him in her noiseless way, and said, gently, "Call her mother, Sir Geoffrey; she will like that best of all."

Sir Geoffrey looked down on the sweet face raised to his; something seemed to rise in his throat as he looked; he coughed it down. "Mother," he muttered, half to himself, "mother;" and then his face brightened all over: "eh, well, yes, that's true—Lady H. will be sure to like that."

END OF VOL. I.

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